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Vol. LXXVII.

HOTSPUR HAL, THE SPORT FROM HARD LUCK

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.



THE SPUTTERING MISSILE WAS CAUGHT IN SURE GRASP AND SWIFTLY FLUNG BACK.

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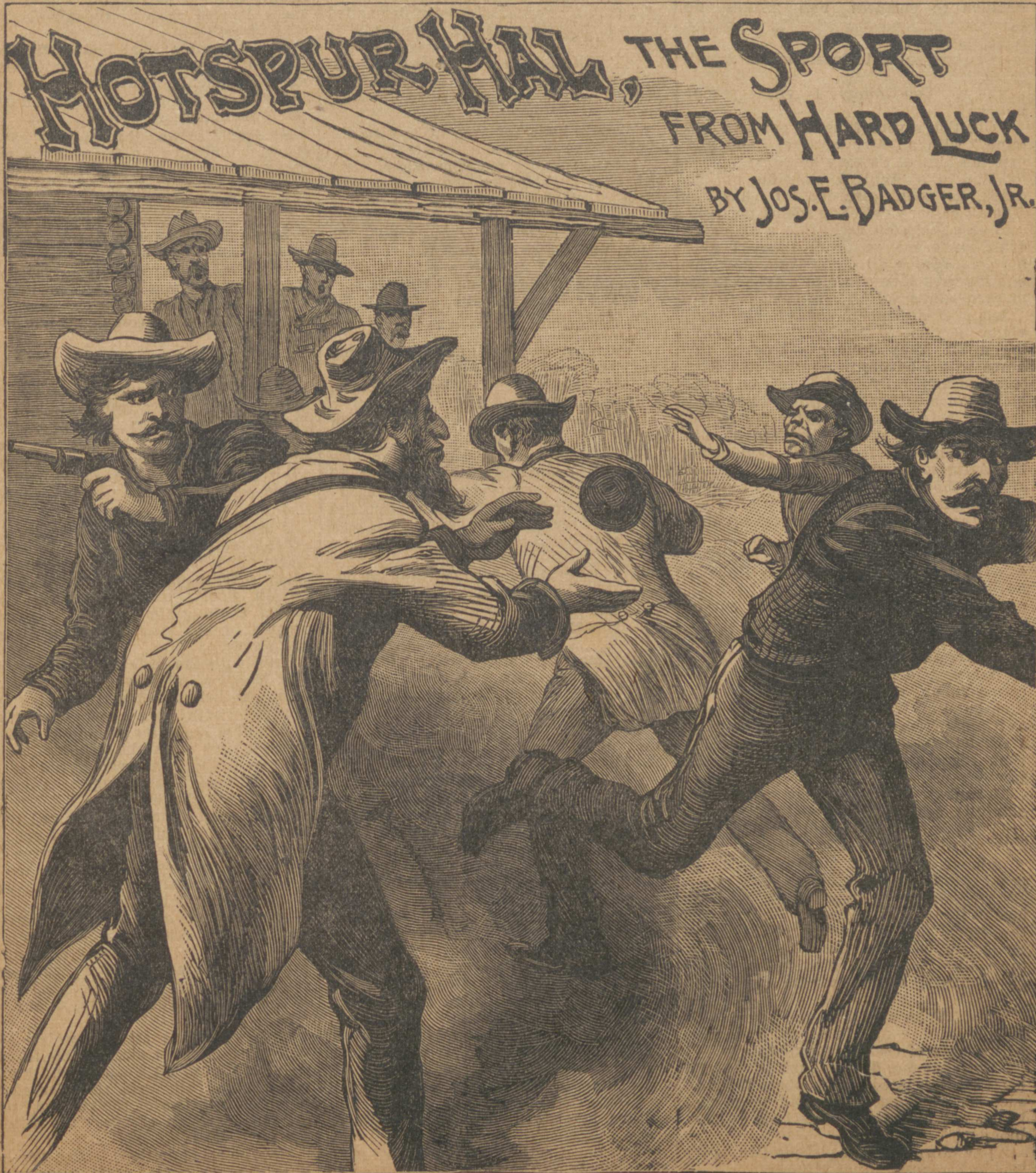
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THE SPUTTERING MISSILE WAS CAUGHT IN SURE GRASP AND SWIFTLY FLUNG BACK.

Hotspur Hal, THE SPORT FROM HARD LUCK; OR, LIVELY TIMES AT HARDSHELL.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.

AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "MONTE JIM," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

TAKEN IN, TO BE DONE FOR.

"Nein, nein, my goot friendt! I makes me no foolishness 'bout dose dings, already!"

"You really think there's millions in it, then, stranger?"

"Vail, now, mein son, you look py me here a leedle vhiles. I neffer say me kvite so much as millions. Dot vhas too pig a mouthvull for Johan Halliboobert to shaw up so soon, already. I see me a goot shance like dot; I dinks me a goot, schmardt man makes him a bile o' goot money uff he bays glose addendion to pusinees und makes no drouples mit nopody else in a hurry. Nein, mynher?"

"You are going to locate in Hardshell, then?"

"Yaw. You dinks I vhas pedder not, eh?"

"Oh, that's your funeral, pardner, not mine," with an airy wave of hand and just the hint of an easy laugh.

"Vuneral? Ach! I vhas me not go deadt, so soon, already! I vhas me 'live all oafert; yaw! You schust pet your two oldt socks on dot! Und a veller as dries make me go deadt avore I gids me goot ready all oafert—vail, now, he gits his eyes oben avore he's avake in de morgen—dot's so!"

Johan Halliboobert nodded his head vigorously, not to say belligerently, shying a bit away from the side of the horse whose leisurely pace his own long legs had kept tally with for a considerable distance without any great exertion.

If not actual suspicion, this movement bespoke a wideawake alertness on his part which went far toward convincing Hal Arlington that this chance acquaintance of the trail was fairly able to take care of himself, and not nearly as great a fool as his outward appearance would naturally indicate.

"A part which I haven't the slightest idea of playing, pardner," the Hotspur hastened to give assurance, "so you needn't mind about shying clear out of the road."

"Vail, now, you see; I vhasn't me so much avraidt as I vhas schoost a leedle pit scary py der schumb-off," glibly declared Johan, resuming his former position, hand on the neatly coiled trail-rope as it hung from the pommel. "You vhas a schendlemans all oafert; I see me dose when I got me mein eyes glosed dight; yaw!"

"Thanks! I'd rather play white than play dirt, any day. But—Hardshell!"

"I grack me dose schell, und gits me dose schweetmeads—eh?"

Hotspur Hal gave a smiling nod as he gazed into those twinkling orbs.

"Well, you seem to have a pretty good idea of it, anyway, pardner. No doubt in the world but that there's plenty of money to be made in a lively mining town like Hardshell, provided one sets about making it in proper fashion."

"So?"

"Yes. Take an all-around sport, with boodle to back up his nerve; or a man with plenty of cash to speculate upon—"

"Dot vhas me; dot vhas me all oafert!" hastily interrupted Halliboobert. "I vhas spegulade und spegulade und spegulade! I vhas puy me vonce und sell me dwice—like dot!"

"Lay down one and pick up two, is it? That's business, anyway!"

"You pet your poots dot's pusiness! Und I vhas pusinees, dwo; I vhas pusi-

nees all oafert in a bile, like a moundain! Und so—see?"

"I haf me a leedle moneys; not mooch; youst a leedle bile. I look me 'roundt by dose pig zity, und I see me a croud und a sham all oafert. Uff a man go schneeze uff his nose, here vhas dwo, six, dwendty schops vly open und mans schumb outd mit armvull of handker-scheef—like dot!"

"So I say me, 'Go on, Johan Halliboobert! Here all mans vandt to sell und no mans to puy. Go on, mein son!'"

"And so you have wandered clear out here into the wild and woolly wilderness, where wolves are heap sight more plentiful than sheep, and criminals than Christians. To speculate, is it?"

"In mein own vay—yaw. I stardt me oop a leedle second-handt und schunkshop. I puy me of dose miner-mans when he vhas trunk, und sell him when he goes sober some more. You see?"

Again Hal Arlington laughed amusedly, as his honest blue eyes met those keenly twinkling orbs of red-tinged jet.

"Catch them going and coming, and skin them both ways, is it?"

"Yaw. Vhy nodt?" coolly demanded this odd specimen of the genus speculator. "Uff a mans gids trunk, he vhas a vool. Uff he vhas a vool, he tond't got some sense. Uff he got no sense vhat pisnees hef he got mit some money; hey?"

"There's logic for you, at any rate!" admitted the Hotspur.

"I tond't know me some—lotchick!" with wary shake of long-haired head and shrug of sloping shoulders. "I knows me only pusinees all oafert. I puy me scheeb, und I sell me tear. I eadt me leedle, und I cook me only vhat I tond't gan sell. Uff I haf me a pite on mein vork und a vheller he say, 'I vandt dot'—goot! I sell me dot pite, and shaw me mein dongue undill I hef 'nodder got ready—so!"

It was now the Hotspur's turn to shrug shoulders, which he did with averted gaze, for this undisguised avarice began to disgust his honest soul.

And yet—how much was truth, how much adroit semblance?

Almost from their first encounter, now a couple of hours and a goodly number of miles further away from Hardshell, Arlington fancied this queerly garbed and oddly talking stranger was something more than he permitted to show on the surface.

With a keen eye for faces and an almost perfect ear for tones, Hotspur Hal could not say that he had ever met this man before; and still that curious doubt lingered.

Only for that fancy Arlington would have passed on with little more than the usual salutations of the day. As it was, he had moderated his pace to more nearly suit that of the footman, covertly studying his chance acquaintance from that time to this.

What the result would have been had nothing occurred to interrupt that covert study can only be surmised; but such an interruption did come, and in a far from agreeable guise.

It was a wild and romantic trail by which the tri-weekly stage covered the leagues lying between Capsheaf and Hardshell, and just now the oddly matched wayfarers were crossing that portion locally known as "The Divide," where the road itself was barely wide enough for a single team to pass, its left hand edged with ragged rocks torn from a nearly solid ledge by drill and exploding giant powder.

Beyond this low fence, or guard, lay a deep gulch, its nearly perpendicular walls marked with rock points and darkened by evergreen shrubs, too gnarled and stunted in growth to merit the title of trees.

With never a thought of peril entering their minds as they progressed, the two travelers bound for Hardshell crossed the apex and began the gentle descent,

seeing and hearing naught to give uneasiness until they were fairly rounding the abrupt "elbow" in the trail.

Then—

The road turned away from the gulch at a fairly sharp angle, at the same time widening out, with cover springing up along the right-hand side, out of which shot a snaky coil, even as a clear, stern voice made itself heard in dire challenge:

"Halt! Hands up or eat lead!"

That snake-like coil resolved itself into an uncoiling lasso, the pliant loop of which settled deftly over head of horse, closing with a vicious pluck almost before rider or footman could realize trouble was in the air.

Although Henry Arlington had barely completed his third decade of life, nearly one-half of that term had been spent amid scenes of danger and trial, and complete though this surprise assuredly was, he swiftly took action, prompt as it was decisive.

The noose had scarcely time to close about neck of horse ere it parted from the rest of the lasso with a sharp twang, cleanly severed by the keen-edged blade which flashed through the air the very next second.

The startled animal had instinctively recoiled, resisting the cruel strain which was so suddenly thrown upon its neck, and now, as the rope gave way, it staggered on that rocky footing.

Hotspur Hal was thrown forward and sideways until he lay far over the withers of his nag, but so good a rider would never have fared worse but for totally unexpected treachery.

There came a howl of terrified protest from the lungs of Johan Halliboobert, and at the same instant Arlington felt a strong hand clutch his left ankle, giving him a lift and toss which, added to the impetus received through the staggering recoil of his horse, completed his downfall.

A savage cry burst from his lips as the Sport felt himself pitching headlong out of the saddle, and even as he struck heavily upon the rocky trail he could distinguish Johan crying aloud for mercy!

"Cover him, lads!" added that stern voice, as its owner sprang fairly out of cover and made a deft clutch at the bridle reins. "Don't give him a chance to— Take or kill 'em both!"

It seemed like breath wasted, for even as the words crossed his masked lips sturdy knaves were rushing from ambush, some pouncing upon the overthrown Sport, others grasping Halliboobert, treating him none the less rudely because of his quavering cries for pity and mercy.

Even with the odds so heavily against him, Hotspur Hal proved none too easy a prey, struggling fiercely, writhing and squirming equal to a slippery eel, finally breaking holds far enough to grasp a revolver and work the double action, though aiming was wholly out of the question while that living mass covered his head and shoulders.

That report sounded smothered to his own ears, and Arlington could guess at the results only through catching a savage curse and cry, unless from the renewed ferocity with which he was grappled and crushed into subjection.

More than one cruel blow was delivered ere that subjection was completed, but when the pistol was wrested from his grasp and harsh hands closed fiercely about his throat, shutting off the breath of life, Hotspur Hal gave in, as any wise man ought.

With an adroit celerity which spoke well for their training, the footpads stripped him of all weapons and knotted arms behind his back, then jerked him upon his feet, two of the masked knaves gripping each an elbow, while awaiting further orders.

He who acted as their leader was holding the horse in subjection, uttering curt, crisp commands, as the occasion seemed to justify, and now that the double cap-

ture proved complete, he spoke up, sharply:

"Good enough, lads! Take 'em both back under cover. Clap a stopper on their jawing tackle if either fellow tries to sing too loud!"

Hotspur Hal was dizzy and nearly blinded by the desperate struggle so lately undergone, yet he had sight sufficient left him to take brief note of his trail companion, likewise in bonds.

The brace of captives were hustled off at a lively rate, leaving the stage road and passing through a narrow defile, which quickly widened out into a comparatively clear and level tract of open ground.

Yonder were tethered a number of horses, and coming from that same direction was a figure which, even under such circumstances, caused the Hotspur Sport to give start and slight ejaculation.

"A woman!"

"Captain Judy, at your service, sir!" came the ready response, followed by a clear, musical laugh, as gloved hands managed neat riding skirt while their mistress bent in graceful courtesy.

"Captain Judy—you?"

"Why not, pray? Have you any particular fault to find with—"

One of those gloved hands shifted to grip pearl and silver butt of revolver, while masked and plumed head was tossed in swift resentment; but Hotspur Hal was far from being a fool, and made prompt amends.

"Only with fate that I am not—Punch!"

"Instead of being Dennis Pants, is it?" with another merry laugh, which certainly sounded out of place under existing circumstances. "It's a mighty flip tongue you carry about with you, anyway, stranger!"

Just then a man and horse passed between them, blocking the ready reply which would have come from the Sport, a surly voice making itself heard:

"Business, Judy; this isn't Flirtation Corner, d'y' mind?"

"All right, major. I wouldn't flirt with a sick kitten!"

Madame Judy certainly had no lack of good nature, if one was to judge from her ready laughter; and despite his own far from agreeable predicament, Hotspur Hal followed that graceful shape with his eyes as Captain Judy turned away, bearing the leader company, as the horse was led across to a stunted pine, there to be tied for the time being.

"Who is she? Surely not—then it isn't all lies, what rumor has to say about a woman road-agent?"

Keen as was the Sport's curiosity concerning this masked enigma, it gave way to a far different sentiment as a groaning sound caused his head to turn swiftly toward a far less agreeable object: the bound and shivering figure of Johan Hallibooper.

"Ach! Mein cracious cootness! Sooch drouples—sooch drouples all oafar me in a bile!"

"You infernal scoundrel! What made you give me the dirty dump?" almost savagely exploded the Hotspur, wrenching at his bonds, as though itching for a fair grasp at the Dutch member.

"I neffer—I neffer do dot!" quavered Johan, shrinking away like one with a fresh access of terror. "So hellup me kee-riminy kee-ristmas all oafar! I vhas so—ach! stob him, somepody!"

Failing to break his bonds asunder, yet stung to fury by the memory of that treacherous action, Arlington strode forward and aimed a vicious kick at the Dutchman, only to be foiled by Johan with an awkward jump and dodge.

Before his assault could be improved upon, strong hands grasped the Sport and held him helpless, in obedience to the sharp command issued by Major Punch.

"What are you trying to kick up such a row about, anyway, young fellow?" was his sharp demand, as he came quickly forward.

"That's all right, sir," cried Arlington,

ceasing his useless struggles, yet with none the less anger in face, eyes, and tone. "Just turn me loose for two seconds by the watch, and if I don't spread you a carpet of sauerkraut, schweitzerkase, and limburger—"

"Do it, Punch—let 'em loose, major!" cried Captain Judy, clapping her hands as one in high glee at the circus in prospective.

"Yes, do it," cried Hotspur, "and I'll show you more fun in a minute than you can forget in a solid month!"

"Ach! Mein cracious cootness!" groaned the Dutchman, shivering and shrinking afresh. "I vhas crowing me sick some more, already!"

"What's your grudge against Dutch, stranger?" demanded Major Punch.

"Didn't he give me the foot just as I was about to—"

"And so saved your life," crisply cut in the chief of road-agents, with an impatient gesture. "I had you lined. Another moment and I would have—well, you're here and alive, instead of being—heap worse off!"

"That's all right, maybe, if you only think so. I don't. And I say it all over: turn me loose for just ten seconds—"

"For what purpose, pray?"

"To thump a free lunch out of that scoundrel who dumped me!"

"Ach! No, no! I neffer meant—I neffer vhas—I scare me so pad I vhas go grazy py mein sdomach all oafar! I hear me somepody say, 'Dutch, crap a root!' Und so—und so—I dinks me dot vhas a root, already!"

"What! you infernal liar from—"

"Dot vhas so; I say, me it in my brayers! Uff it vhasn't so, I go kick me a shackass mid!" protested Johan.

In spite of his just indignation, Hotspur Hal could not wholly refrain from joining in the laugh which this assertion raised among their captors; but he was still angry enough to fling a stern threat at the head of his unreliable acquaintance of the afternoon.

"That's all right for now, Dutchy. I'll settle your accounts later on, and the payment will be none the lighter for having to wait. Now," he added, turning more directly toward the road-agent leader, "what comes next, gentlemen?"

"Wait a bit, please," answered Major Punch; then, turning upon the other prisoner to sharply demand:

"Who and what are you, anyway, Dutchy?"

Whereupon Johan Hallibooper glibly rattled off a more or less involved explanation, the kernel of which was pretty much the same as he laid before Hal Arlington; that he was bound for Hardshell, there to set up business in the second-hand way.

"I vhas a boor mans all oafar, goot shendlemans; so boorer as dot Shob's durkey-cock in der piple-pook! I hef me dwo, dree, gouble tollars or so, like dot. I vhas crowing oldt py mein silfer hairs; see? Und so I dells me like dose: 'Co you avay oudt vest, mein son! Co you where you may puy cheab und sell tear, und lay me ub some moneys vor dot oldt age vich is greebing on dop uff you so schwiftly! Co you und—'"

With an impatient mutter Major Punch flung out a gloved hand and sharply smote those volubly spluttering lips, cutting short the explanation which he had demanded.

Johan staggered back, but was quickly checked. The road-agent locked fingers where long hair and straggly beard came together, giving a jerk and pull which brought a muffled howl of protesting pain from the luckless Dutchman's lips.

Major Punch plainly suspected a cunning disguise, but if he hoped to thus tear aside the mask, he was doomed to suffer disappointment, for neither hair nor beard came away in answer to his tug.

"Just cork that howl up, will you, Dutch? I'll talk to you further on, but for now—hold your hush or fare the worse!"

Then he turned abruptly upon Hotspur Hal, saying:

"Now, I'll attend to your case, my pretty fellow!"

CHAPTER II.

THE MAN WITH A HANDCART.

By this time the Hotspur Sport had regained his wonted coolness, and was clearly prepared for whatever fate might hold in store.

Instead of betraying either uneasiness or dread, he gave a brief nod, then coolly spoke:

"Excuse my hand, pardner. I don't know a living soul I'd rather close fingers upon than—you are Major Punch, are you not?"

"Who are you that crows so mighty brash, first?"

"Half-white and free-born. I can tell you who I am not, easier, though."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That I'm not afraid to show my face to either friend or enemy. Can you say the same, Major Punch?"

"Never mind my face for just now. We're here for business, not for idle chaff or—"

"There's only one face on the big footstool I'd rather gaze upon, and that is—will you favor me, Captain Judy?" turning far enough to front that feminine figure, bowing with mock reverence the while.

"Thanks, awfully," retorted that enigmatic dame or damsel, giving courtesy, for bow, then adding: "But I prefer a handsomer looking-glass, my dear stranger!"

"And I thought I was so pretty!" with a vigorous sigh.

"That's where two fools met: thought and thinker!" a bit viciously retorted the feminine road-agent, shrugging shoulders and turning partly aside, as though done with that subject, once for all.

"Another slap in the face! Well, I'll try hard to survive. And so—what comes next, Major Punch?"

"About this fellow," with wave of hand toward Johan Hallibooper. "What do you know of him, anyway?"

"I can't tell you just what he is, sir, but I can tell you what he will be."

"And that is?"

"The sorriest Sheeny that ever talked through his nose, once I get a fair shake at the scoundrel!" almost savagely vowed the Hotspur.

The other prisoner sent up a husky howl of protest at this speech.

"Nein, nein! I vhas me no Shew! I hef me no Sheeny plood inside me, effer vonce! I vhas bure Chermans all oafar! I neffer know vhy—"

"Choke him off, lads!" sternly commanded Major Punch, and on the instant Johan was grappled by a brace of lusty knaves, who quickly throttled him into subjection and silence both.

Hotspur Hal watched this with curling lip, as one might who felt himself proof against such clumsy deception.

Right or wrong, he was giving Dutch Johan credit for belonging to this gang of law breakers, and for playing his difficult part with rather more than average acuteness; still, playing a part past all doubting.

Waiting until he saw Hallibooper quelled by the footpads, the chief of road-agents turned again upon his other captive, speaking crisply:

"Now, then, who are you? What are you, stranger?"

"Well, since you ask it so politely, here you are. My name is Henry Arlington, sometimes called Hotspur Hal. I'm a white man by birth, a sport by profession, and my home is wherever I hang up my hat for supper."

"Where from and whither bound?"

"From Capsheaf last, headed for Hardshell. Whether I ever make my destination depends upon you and yours, I reckon."

"How are you fixed, financially?"

"None too liberally. I owned a few

dollars a bit ago; just now I suppose that belongs to another master."

"How long have you known this fellow?"

"Too long. Only for him—"

"You might have fared heap sight worse, as I told you before."

"All right. Turn about is no more than fair play, so—who and what are you?"

"Major Punch, for the who; I fancy you can guess at the what without further assistance," dryly responded the outlaw.

"And I am Captain Judy, very much at your service, sir!" quoth that individual, tripping gracefully forward, spreading her rather scanty skirts, the better to do full justice to her profound courtesy.

Hotspur Hal gazed keenly into that masked face, taking note of the eyes which sparkled through the oval slits in silken covering, yet foiled in his effort to fully determine their hue.

A trim-built, brisk-moving figure, clad for ease in the saddle, as well as to please feminine modesty, after a fashion.

Jetty hair hanging in a thick braid down her back, while head was crowned with a plumed toque, well fitted for fast riding in case of an emergency.

About the trim waist glimmered a belt of stamped leather, with silver mountings, fastened to which was sheath for ivory hafted knife and a brace of pearl-handled revolvers.

All this was taken in at a single glance, and failing to catch any more definite clew to her identity, Hotspur Hal bowed with grace to match her own, audaciously speaking:

"Your servant, fair Mask! Next to holding, I would rather be held up by—Captain Judy!"

"Oh, you naughty, naughty man!" simpered the fair dame, drooping head coyly and shaking her shoulders with counterfeit bashfulness.

"A fellow who wouldn't sin for you, Captain Judy, wouldn't eat a ripe plum that dropped fairly between his lips," declared Arlington.

"Ah, me! If fate had only been kinder! If we had met before—"

"Judy!"

"Oh, gracious! I forgot where—why didn't you say you were listening and watching, Punch?"

In spite of himself, Hotspur was obliged to smile at this folly, but knowing that his situation could scarcely be made worse, he was about to press the play further, when Major Punch interposed in earnest.

"Enough foolery, Mr. Arlington. Judy, cork it up, will you?"

"Driven home, wired, waxed, and capped, my dear major!"

"Fall back a bit, please, then. 'Twould take four men, a dog, and a pile o' cats to keep that clapper of yours from ringing on the empty air, Judy!"

"Compliments on tap—I don't think!" muttered the insulted female, flouncing off in high dudgeon—apparently.

From first to last Hotspur Hal had been on the keen alert for something more than had as yet befallen, nor was he mistaken.

Although they might jest, and even exchange compliments on occasion, these gentry of the road and trail had a keen eye for business, and the fine words which had passed between them by no means prevented a thorough rifling.

A neat sum of money, mainly in bank-notes, was taken from Arlington, but he never made a kick at that, although it represented his whole capital at present.

But when his pistols were taken, together with the belt which had supported them and his trusty knife, he did enter a protest in good earnest.

"Play at least half-way white, Major Punch," he said, harshly. "You are welcome to the money, at least until I can ask for it back; but my guns; draw the loads and see that I haven't a cartridge left, if you like, but don't take them!"

"Shut up. You're too mighty ready to use guns, pardner. 'Twas only blind luck that kept you from doing mischief out yonder."

"You're all cur, then, major?"

But the road-agent turned away without retort or reply, personally searching and robbing the Dutchman, paying not the slightest heed to the mumbled prayers and pleadings for leniency on Johan's part.

"Ach! Mein himmel in glory! Ach! I vhas ropped—I vhas ruint all oafar! I vill me co sdarfe when I gits me dot blace py! I hef me no moneys vor—ach! I co me grazy in my sdomachs—yaw!"

"Shut trap, you howling donkey!"

"Ach! I vhas ruint—I hef me co deach school or dake in vashing py der veek! I hev me—ach!"

Major Punch flung up a hand, and two men pounced upon the lamenting German, choking off his moans, amid their own grim chucklings.

Before more could be done a peculiar sound came floating through the air, and Captain Judy cried out, sharply:

"Business, all! That means—"

"Some one on the trail!" cut in Major Punch. "Hustle these men back out of sight and hearing, Judy, while I—buckle down to business, my lads! Maybe this is what we've been waiting for ever since—"

So much Hotspur Hal could distinguish amid that general bustle and confusion, but then he was grappled with and forced hastily away, his back turned toward the stage road, his face toward the wilder recesses lying beyond "The Divide."

Not such a long journey; only across to where the horses of the lawless band were tethered, in fact; but as Major Punch and his other men moved away in an opposite direction, all purposes were served, and Hotspur Hal was left to feed upon imagination in place of facts.

Captain Judy no doubt read aright the powerful curiosity which was visible in the Sport's face, for she drew a revolver from her girdle, cocking the weapon even as she spoke, in cool, clear accents:

"You're a mighty pretty fellow, Sport; a tall man and nice! I feel that 'twould be no very difficult matter to love one like you, if only my heart and hand weren't already engaged."

"I always was in cruel hard luck!" sighed the Hotspur.

"And you'll be in still worse without you've brought a bit of good sense to help balance your cheek, Mr. Arlington. In other words—if you try to kick up even the ghost of a row before full permission is granted, I'll lift your roof so high it'll only come down in a red rain!"

That pretty weapon rose until the muzzle lightly dented a temple for an instant, then Captain Judy fell back a pace, standing on guard, with a couple of lusty knaves as aids and backers.

Meanwhile, Major Punch and his fellows had hastened back to the stage trail, there to reform their ambuscade, warned of coming prey by the outlaw on the lookout.

There was little time to waste in preliminaries, for even now a strong, if not especially musical, voice was audible, trolling forth a ditty which, some two-score years before the present date, had been a favorite with knights of the golden fleece.

"I soon shall be in Frisco, lads,
And there I'll look all 'round,
And when I see the gold lumps there,
I'll pick 'em off the ground;
I'll scrape the mountains clean, my boys,
I'll drain the rivers dry,
A pocketful of rocks bring home,
So, brothers, don't you cry!"

Oh, California!

That's the land for me;

I'm bound for San Francisco

With my washbowl on my knee!"

While roaring forth this terse chorus

at the top of his voice, a man in rough garb came within eye range of the waiting road-agents, and Major Punch muttered an order in eager tones, just as though he felt fully assured the coveted prize was at last well within his grip.

Down him—you've got to take him, lads!"

And yet, surely there was small prospect for rich pickings from yonder typical prospector, now letting his battered handcart roll of its own weight down the slope, merely guiding its progress with dingy hands, ungreased wheels creaking on rusty spindle, the whole outfit looking not worth a second glance from covetous eyes.

The miner was still upon the straight stretch of road, bordered with stone guard to the dangerous gulch, when Major Punch and his men broke cover, pistols in hand and ready for action.

"Hands up, there!" harshly commanded the road-agent, as he sprung to the front. "Hold, you infernal idiot!"

For, seemingly frightened nearly out of his wits by that sudden irruption of armed men, the digger recoiled, then whirled his rickety cart around, as though thinking to find safety in head-long flight with his humble belongings.

Instead, the time-weakened wheels struck heavily against the rocks piled along the verge of the gulch, one giving way, and so pitching the whole rude outfit over into space—pick and shovel, pan and coffee pot, meal bag and flitch of none too cleanly kept side meat!

With a wild yell of mingled rage, fright, and despair, the prospector stumbled himself, falling in an awkward heap and rolling over and over in his desperate efforts to retrieve his error; and above all rung forth the fierce challenge of the outlaw leader:

"Stop, you fool! Hold—hands up, or I'll turn you to a sifter!"

With a violent flopping of limbs, the digger turned over in a sitting posture, elevating both arms above his head, shaking tangled locks out of his eyes the better to distinguish those armed shapes.

One look that way, another at the point where his belongings had vanished, then the fellow broke into a perfect flood of curses against the foul luck streak which had come across his pathway in life.

"Grubstake gone to blazes, an' me plum' shoal on the bar!" he huskily wailed, maintaining his position as the road-agents came closer. "My last chaine gwine up the flume, an' now—oh, help me cuss the luck, cain't ye, strangers?"

Major Punch stooped a bit, as though for a closer look, then drew his tall figure erect once more, with a mocking laugh, to say:

"Come, come, now; that's entirely too thin, old friend!"

CHAPTER III.

WHERE IS THE MONEY?

"Too thin?" echoed the prospector, hands lowering far enough to clasp his shaggy paw and give it a despairing shake. "It's a streak o' crooked luck so mighty thick ye couldn't give it fair measure with a forty-foot pole!"

"Come, come, take a brace, pardner."

"That's easy 'nough fer you to say, dug-gun ye all over!" growlingly retorted the digger. "But fer me—jest the one weenty grubstake, an' it gone to blazes by 'xpress; An' me never two red cents to rub ag'inst the other, nur credit to kiver even the ghost of a meal! An' me—"

Again Major Punch leaned closer to the mourner, eyes fairly glowing through the holes in his mask.

In spite of his seeming despair at evil fortunes, the miner shrunk perceptibly, and then the chief of road-agents drew erect once more, giving vent to a harsh, mocking laugh.

"Yas, you kin snicker to snort, blame ye!" surlily mumbled the held-up.

crouching there in the rocky trail like a crippled being. "But fer me—"

"Ruined, are you, pardner?"

"Bu'sted so mighty flat that I couldn't—an' you make heap sight o' fun out of it all, don't ye, now?"

"And you haven't anything left you, poor devil? All gone; even hope and expectations?"

"Gone; over the dump!" with a spasmodic nod and flirt of dingy paw toward rock guard and shadowed gulch. "Durn the luck, aryhow!"

Major Punch laughed right heartily at this, head going back and gloved hands clapping sides as though his ribs were suffering through boisterous mirth.

Those untimely sounds must have aroused the curiosity of Captain Judy, for she came hurrying to the trail, speaking sharply, yet in tones not wholly devoid of music:

"What's biting you, pardner? Have you caught a tarantula instead of—our particular game?"

"Caught the original barnacle, Judy; look at him, will you? The only and Simon-pure original Barnacle! First to hit Cherry Creek. First to strike pick and ply shovel. First to fill and wash a pan for the pretty colors which—bah!"

With a swift movement Major Punch came closer to where the fellow was still crouching; then, speaking in sneering tones:

"Dead broke and eternally ruined, is it, stranger? Well, now, maybe we can help you out of the hole, just for luck. And so—how much will you take for the option you hold on the Hot Stuff?"

The prospector shrank a bit further, catching his breath like one given a sudden douche of ice water.

"Eh? I don't—"

"Bah! You're playing it mighty well, old man, but it's too thin—decidedly too thin!" cried the road-agent, then making a sudden snatch at that shaggy head, tearing away both hair and beard, exposing to view a smoothly shaven face and closely cropped skull.

"Come out o' that, Leonard Boulware!" he cried, in fierce triumph, as he waved the mass of false hair on high. "Well played, but—"

As though on powerful springs just set free, the counterfeit prospector leaped to his feet, with a hoarse cry of rage and hatred, then surged forward with clutching fingers, as he fairly snarled:

"You devil! Who are you? Show your face or—"

But Major Punch was not a man to be so easily grappled where his interests ran the other way, and, paying no heed to the warning cries as they came from lips of man and woman, he ducked that half blow, half clutch, stepping swiftly aside to evade that plunge, at the same time thrusting forth a deft foot, across which his assailant tripped in his blind rage.

Swift as thought itself the outlaw threw out a strong hand, striking the luckless fellow between the shoulders, thus completing his downfall.

With ugly force Leonard Boulware plunged headlong to earth, rolling over and over along that flinty slope, checked only by the stout knaves, who were swift to act in their turn.

"Don't hurt him, lads!" cried Major Punch, voice full to overflowing with unholy triumph the while. "Handle him like eggs of gold, for he's worth more to us than a dozen stage coaches—yes!"

With fellows so handy with their tools, 'twas but brief work to disarm and bind behind his back the hands of the unmasked wayfarer, half-stunned as he surely was by that ugly fall.

While the knaves were thus engaged, Captain Judy spoke in brief, sharp whispers to her mate, Major Punch replying in like tones.

"What comes next, boss?" asked one of the footpads, as Boulware was lifted upon his feet and held by pinioned elbows.

"Steady him—so! Now you can fall

back a bit, lads. I hardly think the gentleman will tempt us with a footrace," grimly mocked the leader.

Left to himself, Leonard Boulware steadied his trembling limbs as best he could, exposed face paler than usual, but by no means that of either cur or craven.

"Not at you, you scoundrel!" he panted, huskily, a hot flush leaping into face as he noted that derisive chuckle. "I'm badly shaken up, but in spite of that, and old as I am, I can make you eat dirt if given even half a chance!"

"Oh, we all know you're a mighty tough nut to crack, Boulware, but this time you've bitten off heap sight too much! And—the idea of a church deacon of your caliber—actually trying to cheat the toll takers, Lenny!"

"I'm no church deacon, but I can make you say your prayers—"

"While I can take up the collection, eh? So—fork over, Lenny! Pay as you go, and you'll live all the longer, my dear fellow! Come! you have got more than one man's share of the filthy lucre, Lenny, and—"

"How do you know so mighty much?" fiercely cut in the prisoner.

"That's my business, dear fellow, and you shouldn't waste precious time by asking ridiculous questions. You've got money enough along to richly repay all the trouble we've been put to in holding you up, so—for the last time of asking: fork over what you owe, Lenny!"

Instead of flinching or betraying fresh rage at this blunt demand for tribute, the prisoner laughed, shortly, harshly, more like victor than vanquished.

"Eyes open, pardner!" warned Captain Judy, in a swift whisper from where she was taking keen notes. "He means mischief—sure!"

"You'll hardly feel like retiring on the wealth you steal from me, this trip, anyway."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just this much: You had the laugh on me when you held up the stage and emptied my pockets, two weeks ago, Major Punch; but for now—the laugh is on my side."

"What do you mean, I say, curse you?"

"That you are badly fooled if you think to get any big money from me this trip. I mean just that; neither more nor less."

"Bah! tell that to the marines, for I know better. And to prove it, I'll just go through your clothes—so fashion!"

With the air of one who confidently expects to make his wildest expectations more than good, Major Punch suited actions to words, swiftly and thoroughly searching his latest captive.

He found some money; a few dollars in coin, with a couple of notes by which the total was doubled; but these he flung aside with a vicious curse, to search further and yet more closely.

"You've got all there is of it, Major Punch," coolly declared the one under examination, only to have a heavy hand smite his lips as the outlaw cried in turn:

"You lie, Leonard Boulware! There is more—thousands and thousands of it! You had it; you were trying to sneak in enough to pay for the Hot Stuff! Where is it, you hound?"

"Where is what, pray?"

"The cash—the money you needed to pay off Moses Grinberg—to make good the option you hold on his claim, the Hot Stuff?"

Boulware forced a brief laugh before making answer.

"Time enough and to spare, major. The date is not nearly here, yet. Don't you worry, though; I'll have the cool, hard cash in Hardshell amply in time for making good that option, in spite of you or the devil!"

Through all this Captain Judy had been on the keen alert, using her eyes and her wits as well. Now, as Major Punch broke into a storm of mingled threats and imprecations, she stepped

quickly to the front and spoke to the point:

"He hasn't it on his person, pardner, but that cuts no ice. He did have it, else why such a disguise?"

"A Daniel come to judgment!" quoth Boulware, sneeringly.

"That leaves only one other way; it went over the dump with his handcart!"

With an involuntary cry and imprecation Boulware strove to burst his bonds, the effort fetching a couple of road-agents to his side with a leap, holding him fairly impotent.

He quieted down almost immediately, forcing a laugh which was meant to convey both scorn and ridicule with its defiance; but Captain Judy was not so readily deceived.

"Look at his face!" she cried, in triumph, to her mate in mask. "Ah-ha, my pretty fellow! You can throw dust in masculine eyes, but when it comes to foolishing a woman—not any!"

Again Boulware forced a laugh, but 'twas too late. He had betrayed himself, and even Major Punch could see as much, now.

"Hustle him back to where the others are, lads," came his curt command, and, in spite of the desperate struggle which he put up against such heavy odds, Leonard Boulware was removed, as directed.

Meanwhile, Captain Judy had passed to the point where the rock guard was marked by the wheels of the handcart, leaning far over, to peer downward in search of the real or purely imaginary treasure.

"It's gone clear to the bottom, I reckon, Punch," she said, as the major came to her side. "It's there, safe enough, though! Of course, he had the stuff along; if not, why rig up after such a fashion?"

"Oh, blast the whys and wherefores," gruffly cut in her comrade, as he turned away, after one glance down the gulch. "Come! we've got to go around and climb down yonder, or—come, Judy!"

The two head outlaws hurried away on their errand, followed by such of the road-agents as were not otherwise engaged.

It was a difficult bit of work, reaching the bottom of the gulch without going miles around; and that loss of time could hardly be afforded.

More than once both captain and major called for aid from some of their knaves; but in the end the bottom was reached, and in semi-darkness they hurried as rapidly as possible along to the spot where the rickety old handcart had come tumbling down the nearly perpendicular wall of rock.

Captain Judy was first upon the scene, giving a little cry of exultation as she found, the torn meal sack and scattered contents of the handcart.

But where was the longed-for prize?

In vain they searched here and there, tearing open the ragged bag and flinging the remnant of meal far and wide, breaking down bushes and tearing up vines which might possibly have hidden the treasure.

All in vain! Nothing could be seen of the money, and even Captain Judy was beginning to feel like uniting with her cursing consort over their ill luck; when a sudden alarm came from the higher ground.

"Hark!" cried Captain Judy, flinging up a hand to command attention.

"It's the devil to pay, surely!" thundered Major Punch, in hot rage.

CHAPTER IV.

HALLIBOOPER PLAYS A TRUMP.

While all this was being planned and executed, Hotspur Hal was standing quietly under guard, like a man who wishes to make the best of an awkward situation.

Thanks to the wild and roving life he had led almost since childhood, this was by no means his first practical experience with road-agents and their peculiar

ways; hence he was better prepared for the test of nerves than might have been other men to the full as fearless as himself.

Johan Hallibooper was a far different-seeming prisoner, lying in an ugly heap beside a gray boulder, now rocking to and fro, as he huskily mourned his material losses, then shivered with bowed head and rounded shoulders.

There was a little sensation when sounds came from the stage trail, telling of another successful hold-up.

Even Johan "took a brace" for the time being, although he seemed unable to forget his monetary loss for even an instant.

Then Captain Judy stole silently away, leaving only two men on guard over the prisoners.

Both of these knaves seemed to take a deeper interest in what might be going on across yonder than in their own especial charge; and the Hotspur coolly tested the cords by which his wrists were pinioned behind his back.

If they had snapped or slipped sufficiently far, there certainly would have been a merry little circus right in that vicinity; but it was fated not to come after that fashion.

The thongs held firm, and when the sport threw greater strength into the effort to break away, he made noise and movement sufficient to call notice his way.

A revolver muzzle covered him in a flash, and over the leveled tube came the grim warning:

"Stiddy, thar, sport! I'll spyke yer pritty looks fer keeps ef ye make ary mo' trouble. Simmer, now!"

"Ah, now, pardner!" drawled the Hotspur, with admirable coolness. "If I can't do my own work, just scratch the tip of my nose, will you? Got an itch there that reminds me of the time when—thanks, awfully!"

That muzzle moved closer, rubbing against the organ specified until the grateful sport drew back appeased!

Satisfied now that he could not break away, but must await other methods of release, Arlington waited and used his ears, trying to keep tab on what might be transpiring over yonder in the stage trail.

Presently Leonard Boulware was hustled that way, treated with even less ceremony than had been displayed in the case of the two earlier captives.

"Ketched him, didn't ye?" eagerly cried one of the guards, clearly recognizing the counterfeit prospector, now his disguise had been torn away. "Get the boodle, too?"

"Not yit, but we're gwine fer to—stay putt, blame ye fer a cantakerous critter!"

In savage rage, as Leonard Boulware kicked his shins while making another despairing effort at freedom, the burly agent flung his captive rudely across a boulder, adding while the luckless fellow struggled to regain his balance:

"Play white, ye blame' critter, or ye'll sup sorrow with a long spoon in great gobs! Durn a contrary jack-donkey done up into a man's pelt, aryway!"

"Keep a eye on him, mates," gruffly ordered the other fellow, as he turned away in haste to join in that search for the missing treasure. "I'm gwine fer to help the boss out; I be!"

His mate looked powerfully tempted to follow suit, but then thought better of it. This left but three men on guard, and neither of them cared to invite the reprobation of their stern chieftain.

Hotspur Hal made an instinctive movement toward lending the fallen stranger a helping hand, but only to be reminded of his own present impotency.

Mr. Boulware managed to scramble to his feet after a bit, face pale as that of a corpse, save where a little rill of blood had begun to trickle down from a slight wound inflicted by contact with a corner of that gray boulder.

"Tough luck, pardner," sympathetically muttered the sport, as their eyes met.

"So tough that—"

"But it might have been worse, you know," swiftly inserted Arlington, true to his maxim of always looking on the bright side of the shield when one could be found.

Boulware groaned bitterly, shaking his head like one well-nigh lost in the depths of black despair.

"Worse?" he echoed. "It couldn't be worse with me, sir!"

"Oh, yes, it could, pardner. For instance: You're all alive, and that means worth a whole graveyard full of ordinary stiff, don't ye know?"

"Don't ye git too turribly frisky, thar, critters," one of the guards thought it best to give warning over a shoulder, briefly turning away from the quarter in which his deeper interest so plainly lay.

"That's all right, Mister Johnny-with-a-big-gun," retorted the Hotspur, easily. "Reckon there's no law against our wagging tongues, since that's pretty much the only sample of liberty that's left us?"

"Waal, don't ye git too turribly frisky, all the same, now!" repeated the knave.

"Devil—all devils!" huskily muttered Boulware, twisting his hampered arms as best he might, only to again feel how securely he was bound. "I'd give a full year of my life lease just for one minute—"

"And that's precious long odds, too, don't you know?"

Boulware turned more directly that way, concentrating his gaze upon that fairly handsome visage like one searching for a possible likeness; but then he shook his head, muttering:

"I don't—I never met you before, sir? But—that devil of all devils! I'd rather have given my left hand than had this happen!"

"You lost a pretty pile, then, I take it, sir?" observed Hotspur.

Boulware gave start and stare, shaking his head, as he drew back a bit with suddenly born suspicion.

"I don't know you, sir! I have no recollection of ever—you're an utter stranger to me, sir!"

"We're on even terms so far as that matter goes, anyway," coolly retorted the sport; then, adding in a bit more serious tones: "I hope the major and his imps will find what they're looking for, though."

"Why? How dare you hope for—my loss?"

"Well, if they fail to find it, they'll take full pay out of our hides; and I've only got the one I'm wearing at present!"

Only one of the three guards stood wholly faithful to his trust, and even he was standing with face turned in the direction of yonder "dump," listening with all his power, in hopes of catching the glad cry which would announce the longed-for discovery.

His two mates gradually moved further away, yet without entirely abandoning their charge; and as he noted this, Hotspur Hal saw something else which aroused no little curiosity within his breast.

From one corner of his eye he caught an indistinct glimpse of Johan Hallibooper in motion, and turning that way without a sound which could attract notice from the guard, Arlington saw the junk man rising to his feet, eyes upon that same guard, but with a glittering blade bared in his dirty right hand!

With a return of his former suspicions Hotspur Hal parted lips to make a sharp comment, when Johan made an imploring gesture, creeping without the slightest sound his way.

A brace of seconds later Arlington felt that blade slipping between his wrists with a sawing motion, then felt those tense bonds relax; to actually fall apart and leave him at liberty the next moment!

"Keviet, mein goot vriendt!" begged Hallibooper, in the veriest ghost of a whisper, reversing the pocketknife and leaving haft between those mechanically closing fingers, as he breathed in addition: "Make him like you vhas, now, already, while I coes me make some droubles mit dot oogly tuyfel py yonter! I vhas co grazy py mein sdomach uff ye tond't vhas—ach; shiminy kee-ristmas!"

For just then the nearest guard unluckily turned for a precautionary glance at his charges, giving a wild yell of angry dismay as he saw at least one of those captives with arms at liberty.

Like a human catapult Johan leaped upon the half-bewildered fellow in time to knock up that armed right hand, letting the hot lead fly harmlessly toward the vault of blue, then grappling with and flinging the sturdy knave heavily to earth.

Hotspur Hal took fully as swift action, and even before the guard took alarm he was slashing away the thongs which held Leonard Boulware impotent; then, with yells of fierce joy, he snatched up a couple of rocks to hurl at the other guards.

To complete their dismay, Hallibooper scrambled to his feet with pistol in hand, to open fire with marvelous rapidity, making an abundance of noise, if doing no deadly execution, yelling and screeching the while like a veritable fiend.

Taken so completely by surprise, the road-agents "hung in the wind" for but a brace of seconds, then turned tail and betook themselves to headlong flight, ducking and dodging both bullets and stones, as those came whistling and humming past their persons.

In fleeing they opened fire, after a wild and aimless fashion, doing no material harm, yet seemingly scaring Hallibooper into a radical change of tactics.

"Roon, poys—roon like der tuyfel!" he howled, himself setting an example which any fairly prudent man might well have imitated, a few moments later plunging into cover and vanishing from view of both friend and enemy.

Instead of imitating that example, Hotspur Hal sprang across to where the half-stunned road-agent was struggling to regain his feet, hand and foot acting in such perfect concert that the fellow was sent headlong to the earth with crushing force.

Hotspur Hal bent hurriedly over the prostrate knave, feeling for the mate to the revolver carried off by Johan Hallibooper; but in vain!

"The devil and all!" he fairly howled, in bitter disappointment, as he found but an empty scabbard upon that hip. "That infernal Dutchy took 'em both, and—hallo, there!"

But Hallibooper paid no heed, even if he heard, which was rather more than doubtful.

So long as his own life seemed in peril, Johan could and would fight with a desperation which rendered him an awkward customer for anything short of "a chief," but that necessity past—

"I'll make his dirty heels break his ugly neck if—I say, pardner!" cried the Hotspur, springing erect once more, just in time to catch a glimpse of Leonard Boulware as that worthy plunged into the little defile which led to the stage road.

"Dollars to cents he'll make a nasty botch of it all if—here's after him, anyway!"

Armed with nothing more reliable than pocketknife and bit of rock, the sport rushed off in pursuit of his latest acquaintance, paying no further heed to the half-stunned guard or his by this time vanished mates.

Few men were lighter of foot than was the Sport from Hard Luck, but Boulware was not overtaken, and when Arlington came through cover into the road, he caught sight of the man leaning perilously far over the rock guard, peering

into the depths of yonder dark gulch, as though he would follow—

A shot from below, and with a sharp cry, Boulware flung up his arms!

CHAPTER V.

VAIN SEARCH FOR THE CASH.

Hotspur Hal saw the man's head fly back in keeping with his arms, and sprang forward with a cry of mingled warning and rage; for he believed that shot from the lower regions had surely ended a life.

Blood was marking Boulware's face, but that the injury was only superficial was proven by the rapidity with which he rallied, scrambling to his feet just as the sport came up.

"I saw—she shot me—that infernal woman!" he panted, hoarsely, lurching toward the escarpment and kept from incurring a repetition of that peril by the firm grip fastened upon an arm by the Hotspur.

"Hold! Are you crazy, man, dear?"

"A gun—give me a gun and let me—"

"Wish I had one for myself, but I haven't, worse luck!" cut in the sport, forcing the half-crazed man back from the rock-guard, flashing uneasy eyes about them the while. "But we'll get something else not nearly so much to be desired if—come, pardner! Reckon we'd better make a break for tall timber in a hurry!"

Arlington caught a glimpse of a moving shape lower down the trail, and at almost the same instant a revolver began to bark, lead humming viciously, as the blue pellets glanced off the rocks close by them.

Even now Leonard Boulware showed that his thoughts were more taken up by the money he had lost than with fears for his own safety; but Hotspur Hal was not a man to stand on idle ceremony when once fairly in action.

"Get a move on, pardner!" he cried, at the same time fairly rushing his companion in peril up the rock wall on the upper side of the trail, following after with a catlike agility which stood him in admirable stead just now.

For the demoralized guards were rallying their wits and winning back their shattered nerve to some purpose, picking trigger with vicious intent, although as yet just a bit scary about rushing their living game.

From the gulch below came savage oaths and fierce shouts, telling our friends only too plainly that Major Punch and his henchmen were making all possible haste to reach those higher levels, to redeem the fault which surely must have been committed by the guards.

"Pretty rocky prospect, pardner, and that's a scandalous fact!" declared the Sport from Hard Luck, as the two men reached the broken ground above the trail, where fairly effective cover might be had against long-range missiles.

"The inhuman hounds!" gratingly cried Boulware, hands clenched and eyes aglow. "If we were only armed—"

"And that's what ails Hannah Maria—worse luck! With guns we could hold the fort until the cattle returned, but with only—how are you on the farrow, pardner?"

Arlington's hands were fully as busy as his tongue, and they quickly gathered together a number of stones, rough and irregular, yet heavy enough to prove quite effective weapons when manipulated by dexterous hands and muscular arms.

There was no time for awaiting an answer.

Satisfied now that the fugitives had no arms save those given by nature, the angry guard came on with greater confidence, shooting at nearly every stride and yelling with a vigor which spoke well for the condition of their lungs.

Hotspur Hal rose up from cover, throwing stone after stone with marvelous force and precision, knocking one of the lusty knaves over in a howling, gasping

heap, and causing his mates to duck and dodge with far more energy than grace.

"Oh, play white!" fairly howled the Sport from Hard Luck, as he stooped for a fresh supply of nature's ammunition. "Stand up and be knocked down like—catch, blame ye!"

Fresh shouts came from further down the stage trail, plainly telling both guards and fugitives that Major Punch and his fellows were coming with a rush; but then another change came over the scene.

From beyond the apex came vigorous shouts, as though in answer, and as Hotspur Hal instinctively turned face that way, he likewise caught the rattle of wheels and clatter of shod hoofs upon the stony trail.

"Hurrah for us!" he yelled in wild glee, swiftly emptying hands at the dismayed guards below, then tossing his hat high in air. "The hearse is coming, and it isn't our funeral, either!"

Down the slope at top speed dashed another masked figure, hoarsely shouting as he sighted his mates:

"Rack out, everybody! Extra comin', an' chuck full o' cussed guns. Rack out while ye kin!"

"Hold on! Wait for me, if only to—ow!"

Hotspur Hal sprang from cover toward the trail, but that very eagerness proved disastrous to himself and his hopes; a foot slipped on a loose stone, throwing the Sport violently at full length.

Brief though that delay was, it proved quite sufficient for the baffled road-agents to get under full headway, and Hotspur Hal caught but a fleeting glimpse of Major Punch and Captain Judy as, followed by their lesser lights, the toll takers dashed off in full flight.

Then the stage came rattling down the slope at a fine pace, heads and guns sticking out at both windows, while the box seat and the roof likewise showed an armed front.

"Hellow, Sport!" cried a burly fellow as the coach drew up when safely around the turn in the trail. "What ye trying to do here, anyway, old man? From the racket—"

"If you'd made a little less racket on your own hook, Sheriff, you'd have an extra feather for your cap by now," crisply retorted Arlington.

"What? You don't mean that—not Major Punch?"

"And company: exactly. When you broke loose—well, Partington, just throw in a few extra on my account, will you?"

For, after a brief stare into that disgusted face, the burly deputy sheriff flung hat to earth, stamping upon it in fury.

"They've gone! The horses, too!" cried Leonard Boulware.

"And mine along with the rest, just to make it more binding. . . . pay day is bound to roll around, and I'll count that item in with the rest. And—I say, sheriff!"

But Partington was in no mood for questions just then. Snatching up his hat and giving a savage call to his posse, the whole party rushed off in the direction taken by the road-agents, leaving Hotspur and Boulware sole occupants of the scene.

"Which way now, pardner?" asked Arlington, as the other moved away.

"Down yonder—to see if there is—My property!"

Boulware waved a hand toward the gulch into which his handcart and contents had been hurled, and the Sport hastened to bear him company, at the same time letting fall a well-meant caution.

"Keep all eyes open tight, pardner, for there's no saying if one or a couple o' those rascally knaves mightn't have taken a fancy to skulk rather than run. And—well, a cornered wolf can snap mighty keen! And we haven't any too complete an armament, you want to bear in mind."

Boulware made no reply, but that was

fairly excusable, considering the natural difficulties before them.

More than once risking limb if not life, the two men finally succeeded in reaching the bottom of the gulch, then hurried along until directly below the hold-up point.

That was made evident by the scattered meal, to say nothing of the less conspicuous portions of that prospecting outfit.

Leonard Boulware searched the spot for yards around, inspecting every square foot, turning over every obstacle which could by any possibility hide the prize for which he was searching; but all in vain.

"Those devils!" he muttered hoarsely as he gave over the vain quest. "They must have found it!"

"How much was it, pardner?" the Sport inquired.

"Too much—too infernal much!" muttered Boulware, with a gesture which might be interpreted as one of despair rather than of anger alone.

"Beg your pardon, sir," and the Sport drew back a bit. "Don't mean to crowd you, sir, of course, only—well, I'm dead-set on getting full pay for my horse and my guns from this Punch and Judy outfit, and just happened to think I might add a lick or two on your score."

Something in tone rather than words alone pricked the man from Hardshell, and, moving a bit closer, he gazed keenly in that honest face.

Eye to eye for a brief space, then it was palm to palm, fingers closing in the firm grip of fellowship.

"You're a man, and I'm another," said Boulware, tersely. "I can trust you as myself so—'twas twenty thousand dollars; no less!"

"What?"

"That's right, pardner. I lacked just so much ready cash to make up the sum of fifty thousand, without which—but I'll tell you the whole story later on. You're going to Hardshell?"

"I was bound thither, yes."

"Good! I'll see you there, of course. For now—well, it's no use looking further around here. Those rascals surely found the package!"

"You had it in the handcart, then?"

Boulware nodded assent.

"I was rather expecting a hold-up, as you'll understand when there's time for full explanations. I hoped to run the gantlet as a prospector out on a grub-stake, but knew that I couldn't pass an examination if a hold-up should really come. So—'twas in my sack of meal, yonder!"

He kicked the tattered bag with vicious mood, then turned abruptly away and made his way to the stage-road above.

Hotspur Hal bore him company, wondering over this queer affair the while, but then banishing it for the time being when he found the stage still in waiting where abandoned by the deputy-sheriff and his posse.

A few questions made the situation fairly clear, and once again the Hotspur growled his regrets that Partington had not used greater caution in coming upon the scene.

"Out especially to trap the Punch and Judy outfit, yet set up a jamboree just when he might have—confound the luck, anyway!"

"Waal, now, boss, ef ye'd jest hearn him belch while we was a-comin'!" volunteered the veteran driver. "Who but him, an' the hull blame thing over 'cept yellin' glory to the ram!"

"Well, there's many a worse fellow than Jack Partington, nevertheless, pardner, although he did play the blunder-head just a bit ago. And now—you're waiting for the posse, Johnny?"

"Waal, sorter yes an' sorter no. They wasn't nothin' said 'bout me waitin', an' the depity, he done swore a-comin' that let him oncet git on a smell of them critters an' he'd hang right thar ontel hell froze over, ef he couldn't ketch 'em any shorter!"

"That settles it, then!" declared the Hotspur, with an air of relief, as he flung wide one of the coach doors. "Climb in, please, Boulware. Unless you'd prefer a seat on the box?"

"This is plenty good enough for me, but—how is it, driver?"

"Waal, reckon thar hain't no mighty use o' me stayin' out hyar for a week or two; an' that blame depity hain't gwine fer to ketch up with no Punch nur Judy shorter; you hear me belch?"

"All right, Johnny. You're headed for Hardshell, and there's heap sight more fun in jogging along than in standing still. And—I say, Johnny?"

"Danny; make it Dan Whooser, an' keep on a-sayin' of it, then."

"All right, Danny. What sort of whiskey do they hang forth at Hardshell?"

"Good enough fer a hog, boss!"

"All right. Just play you saw a skin-full right over yonder, and see how snugly you can run us up alongside, Danny Whooser."

Hotspur Hal entered the stage, closing the door behind him. The man on the box cracked his whip and sent his team bowling along at a merry pace, heading as directly as the law allowed for Hardshell.

As a rule Arlington vastly preferred a seat on the box while staging it, but now, wholly unarmed and so helpless in case of another hold-up, he altered his choice to suit.

Then, too, he had seen and heard quite sufficient to make him feel an absorbing interest in Leonard Boulware and his affairs.

Still, if the Sport anticipated the full explanation which had been almost promised him by his present companion he was disappointed.

Mr. Boulware seemed decidedly down in the mouth, which might naturally be looked for in one who had met with such a heavy loss; and not until they were fairly in sight of Hardshell did he rouse up and speak with something of his usual animation.

"You were searched and robbed, of course, Mr. Arlington?"

"Of my visible cash, yes," with a faint half-laugh. "But I've always made it a rule to carry at least one fifty-dollar bill sewn up in my rags, and this one was overlooked."

"Well, they didn't leave me even that much. But I started to say, you will make your home at my house until, at least, you can do better?"

"Thanks, but I must beg off. The first thing is to get a brace of guns. One trick lost isn't half the game, and I'm going to win out in spite of Punch and Judy and their whole rascally gang!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE SPORT AND THE SCRAPPER.

Before leaving the stage Hotspur Hal removed the precious bit of tinted paper from its hiding-place, and having bidden his newly-made friend a temporary farewell, strolled on through the rough, unpaved streets of this bustling little mining town, looking for what he soon found: a shop where weapons such as he required were on exhibition.

It took nearly all of his fifty-dollar note to buy a brace of regulation forty-fours, with plain scabbards and belt; but with the tools snugly strapped around his middle, the Hotspur could draw his breath in freedom, feeling himself once more.

After that came a lodging-place, supper, a smoke, then bed: and rarely in his life had Henry Arlington put in eight consecutive hours of sounder sleep.

After a leisurely breakfast the next morning the Sport "felt like a fighting cock," and heedless of his almost empty pockets, he lounged for a bit in the bar-room attached to the hotel where he found lodging.

There was little doubt as to whether or no Danny Whooser had found the good whiskey spoken of back on the trail; for all Hardshell seemed on fire with this, the

latest exploit of the Punch and Judy gang.

Hotspur Hal had said nothing concerning the affair, feeling as he did that he had figured with rather less brilliancy than ordinary.

Leonard Boulware would hardly publish to the world his serious loss, or his disastrous masquerade; yet the whole affair seemed to have become public property, and who else could have published it broadcast unless the driver?

True: there was Johan Hallibooper, and Hotspur Hal turned frequent thoughts that way; for, right or wrong, he felt fairly convinced that the seeming booby was actually an adroit schemer, playing capper for the lawless gang of road-agents.

Although he failed to see the trick turned, he knew that only the ready hand of the Dutchman could have toppled him out of the saddle so deftly, rendering him a helpless prey to the road-agents.

Later on, 'twas true, Johan had run some risk in releasing them both while under armed guard; but still that ugly doubt lingered, and Hotspur Hal kept both eyes and ears open for some definite information regarding the odd customer.

The hotel bar was fairly well patronized that morning, and almost as a matter of course the favorite topic was the recent hold-up.

Arlington seemed wholly absorbed in his cigar, making it burn evenly, in spite of its contrary nature, and paid no particular attention to the general chatter.

More than once something was said which touched his part in the affair more closely, and an odd attempt was made to draw him into the discussion itself.

These half-abashed efforts were easily foiled by one so cool of nerve and ready of wit as was the Sport from Hard Luck, but then came a change which was scarcely pleasant.

A thick-set, smooth-faced, hard-featured fellow came into the bar, and almost from the first made himself particularly disagreeable in the way of coarse comments and insolent remarks.

Hotspur took note of the fellow, experience teaching him that this was one of the "bad men" of Hardshell.

Five minutes later Hal made another mental note; that, for some as yet unrevealed reason, this coarse-mouthed rascal was making a "dead set" at himself, needing but a half-pretext to jump from words to actions.

Blunter and ruder came the insinuations, now openly directed toward the quiet, gentlemanly stranger who leaned so carelessly against the bar.

With all his apparent indolence, almost sleepiness, the Hotspur was never more keenly upon the alert in all his life, and plainly foreseeing a row with this fellow—Dick Fitchner, as he was termed by some of the citizens present—he was trying to discover the real cause of that surly enmity.

All at once the light came as the fellow made a rude gesture, and Arlington straightened up a bit, eyes opening wider and winning a keen glitter more naturally their own.

Just then Fitchner lurched awkwardly forward, seeming to stumble and partly lose his balance, bringing up forcibly against the Sport at the bar.

Recovering himself, Fitchner gave a vicious snarl, showing his teeth in bulldog jaws as he gruffly blurted out:

"Who's ye scrougin', ye cussed dude? Fer little I'd—"

"You tripped and did the crowding yourself," quietly interposed Arlington, removing cigar from mouth and speaking in soft, placable tones.

If he expected to appease the bully by giving the soft answer, the Sport mistook his customer, for that very mildness but urged the thug to still ruder words and actions.

"Call me a liar," will ye?"

"I didn't even call you a fool, my dear fellow," purred the Sport, smiling lan-

guidly. "Unless you happen to be a mind reader—"

"I'm a man-thumper, though, blame ye! An' ef I thought ye meant to play me like that I'd—I'll spoil yer face, just for luck!"

With these words came the blow, but this was by no means the first time Hotspur Hal had come in contact with a "scrapper," and his own movements could almost discount the light itself.

Left arm gave guard as head ducked swiftly to the right, then the Sport swung his own right, not with blow of fist for a knock-out, but to crush that glowing cigar squarely between the eyes of the thug, filling them with sparks and burning ashes, to say nothing of the particles of over-dry tobacco itself.

Fitchner reeled back with a muffled howl of rage and pain, one hand tearing at his eyes while its mate felt for and jerked a revolver from his belt.

There was an immediate scattering of those present, leaving the adversaries alone in the middle of the spacious bar-room; but Hotspur Hal paid attention wholly and solely to Mr. Fitchner.

That revolver was scarcely clear of its scabbard ere it was caught by a set of stronger fingers, twisted away, and tossed lightly back of the bar.

"Ye devil! I'll smash ye like I would—"

"Spell able, first, please!" quoth the Sport, meeting that half-blind rush with bold front, striking down the arm which sent fist toward his own face, then closing with the thug, to give him the heel, driving him backward to the floor with a thud that fairly shook the foundations.

It was but the work of a moment to tear away that belt of arms and toss all after the first revolver; then, as Fitchner scrambled to his feet, fairly wild with rage and impotent hatred, Hotspur Hal grasped him again, lifting him nearly clear of the floor as he ran the fellow swiftly across to the door, then flinging him forth with scant ceremony.

All this was done so swiftly, so easily, so surely that those looking on seemed scarcely able to credit their eyes, knowing as they did what a hard customer this Dick Fitchner had time and again shown himself.

Hotspur Hal flung up a hand to quell the exclamations which now burst forth, speaking sharply himself, with a note of growing anger in his clear, metallic tones:

"Tisn't often that I mix up in a bar-room row, gentlemen, but that fellow—I'm almost open to make oath he's one of the Punch and Judy gang which robbed me yesterday! And—"

"You want to look out fer him, boss, fer he's pizen; clean pizen from start to finish!" cried one well-meaning citizen.

"An' hyar he comes like—eyes open, all!" warned another as Dick Fitchner, dripping wet from a hurried douch in the horse-trough which stood in front of the hotel, came viciously through the open doorway.

"Whar is he?" with a fiery glare of his now partially cleared eyes. "Whar is— Now I'll mash ye like I would—"

"Not!"

For Hotspur Hal, at last fairly confident that this fellow was indeed one of the armed guards left over him by Major Punch, met that rush midway, striking out as he came.

Together the two men surged back through the doorway, Hotspur Hal clearing both man and steps by an agile leap through air, but Fitchner turning a back somersault before reaching the street level.

"Oh, swallow a cane if you lack backbone to stand up in front of a real man, you weak-kneed rascal!" mockingly cried the Sport from Hard Luck, while the maddened thug was scrambling to his feet, wits more confused than ever.

Fitchner did not lack a certain brute courage, however, and utterly regardless

of these repeated discomfitures he dashed a clearing hand across his eyes, then with bull-like roar plunged toward the laughing Sport.

It was the same old story; science against brute force, where the best man was morally certain to come out on top of the heap.

Hotspur Hal had already taken the full measure of his man, and knew that he had a comparatively easy job on hand; but that in no wise altered his original determination.

"You're spoiling for a sound thrashing, and right here you're going to get it, my bully!" was his assertion as they came together.

Spat-spat-spat! In rapid succession those hard-knuckled fists came in contact with face of scrapper, each blow leaving its mark and driving that head backward in spite of the bull-neck and powerful shoulders.

Laughing as he punished, Hotspur Hal shifted step so as to keep his mark confined to pretty much the same spot, giving no heed to the cries and cheers of the fairly amazed witnesses, now increased to a fair crowd.

"It's easy as eating mince pie for Christmas!" declared the Sport, brushing aside those wild strokes and making his own keep rapid tally. "A far nastier job, of course, but a necessary one. It takes a thorough thrashing to do a cur like you any good, Dick, and so—right here you have it, written in red ink!"

Having played with the scrapper until content with the punishment inflicted, Arlington deftly slipped inside those vicious arms, grappling with the fellow, twisting him around and over one hip, then giving Fitchner a beautiful cross-buttock to finish up with.

That really proved to be the capsheaf, for the thug lay in half-stupor for a couple of minutes, then gave a surly groan as he opened his eyes only to see his conqueror standing over him, ready to add more should more be wanted.

"Cry enough, you scoundrel, or else get up and take more!" cried the Sport, pitilessly. "Beg, you whelp!"

"I beg, cuss ye fer a—"

A deft foot swept lightly across those lips, cutting short the superfluous speech; then Hotspur Hal stepped back at ease, watching while the battered scrapper rose painfully to his feet.

A few moments to make sure of his footing, then Fitchner brushed a trembling hand across his bleeding face, looking at the red drops for a bit, then with sudden motion flinging them toward the Sport, snarling:

"The cuss o' blood upon ye by day an' by night! I'll scatter ye to the four winds ef—unless—"

"Unless what?" coolly demanded Hot-

spur Hal as that voice choked and words instead of completing his vicious threat Fitchner gave a sickly grin, nodded his head defiantly, then turned and staggered away.

Hotspur Hal turned, to confront his landlord, whose face was as grave as his tones were serious.

"He's mighty bad medicine, friend. Better have killed him right out, or else left him go his way like a snarlin' cur o' Satan; yes, sir!"

"That's all right, pardner; I've heard curs yelp before now."

CHAPTER VII.

LIGHT ON AN INTERESTING SUBJECT.

Mine host scratched his chin with an air of dubiety.

"Of course, it's more your funeral than mine, Mr. Arlington, but—well, now, sir, you don't want to go altogether by the sort o' show Dick's jest put up."

"A regular bad man, is he?"

"And that's an honest fact. Heap sight more bulldog than cur, anyway," came the emphatic declaration.

"Thanks," with a half-yawn. "In spite of his threats though, I'm open to take fair odds that I'll live to see Master Richard pull hemp, kicking right merrily alongside his leader, Major Punch, and— Well, ladies barred, I reckon!"

"What makes you think—"

"Something I never permit myself to do between breakfast and dinner, my dear sir," politely declared the Sport from Hard Luck, crossing over to the sink and washing his stained hands.

After the exhibition so recently given, not one of those hard by deemed it the part of wisdom to press this cool stranger more closely, although it was plain to be seen that his words had created no little of a sensation.

On his part Hotspur Hal renewed the weed wasted upon Dick Fitchner, and while igniting the contrary article, questioned the landlord briefly, picking up information upon which he was prompt to act.

Leaving the hotel with the careless grace of a man who knows he can take ample care of himself, Arlington turned aside from the business portion of the town, soon after distinguishing a neatly painted house which he knew by description must shelter Leonard Boulware and family; always provided he was blessed with any.

The Sport was spared the need of knocking, for his coming was observed, and the front door swung open at his approach, Boulware himself giving hearty greeting.

"I was just thinking of looking you up, Mr. Arlington, but—come in, come in!"

The Hotspur crossed the threshold, finding himself in the presence of a more than fair young lady, who was introduced as Cora, an only child.

Tall and stately, gifted with a more than ordinary share of beauty, her luxuriant tresses shining like gold, her eyes large and blue as the cloudless sky of Summer.

Still, the young lady left an impression of coldness and even hauteur, and conscious that his present garb showed more or less unmistakable signs of the rough work done in recent hours, Hal drew a bit freer breath when, shortly after his entrance, Miss Boulware excused herself and left the room.

"By the way, sir," spoke Mr. Boulware, after clearing his throat in a half-embarrassed manner. "I believe I promised you to explain a little bit more clearly just why—"

"Wait a bit, please," quietly cut in the sport, lifting a hand to back his words. "Don't you begin to think I'm all eaten up with curiosity, sir?"

"Of course not, but a promise is a promise, and so—"

"One moment, sir. Do you know anything of a fellow called Dick Fitchner?"

"There is such a fellow in Hardshell; yes. Why do you ask?"

"Who does he consort with, as a rule?"

"The lower class. Yet—"

"Not entirely, then?" shrewdly queried the sport, reading that hesitation aright. "He holds dealings with men of a higher grade, too?"

"With one, at least. Why do you ask all this, sir?"

In as few words as possible Arlington explained his encounter with Fitchner, then added:

"I can almost take oath that he was one of the three guards left over us back yonder in the hills. If so, and you can place his associates here in town, seems to me it oughtn't to be a very difficult matter to strike off the scent of Major Punch himself!"

Boulware listened with undisguised interest. He frowned darkly, striking clenched fist upon table as he burst forth in fierce rage.

"I knew it must be! I felt it in my bones! And all this while the infernal scoundrel was smiling and fawning about like— Oh, you cur!"

The sport's eyes won a brighter glow, for he felt that matters were growing more interesting, and that a prospect for fun and vengeance combined was almost surely opening before them.

"Any serious objections against calling names, Mr. Boulware?" he asked, after a brief silence.

The admirable coolness with which these words came produced an almost instantaneous effect, and Leonard Boulware calmed himself, smiling faintly as he met those half-quizzical blue orbs.

"Foolish, isn't it, in a man of my age and gray hairs?" he asked, at the same time rising to his feet, to add: "Will you just step across to my own room; my snuggery, or 'growlery,' as Cora sometimes dubs it."

"At your service, sir," promptly responded the Sport from Hard Luck as he rose to his feet, hat in hand.

Mr. Boulware led the way to another room, smaller than the first, yet clearly better suited for anything like a confidential confab.

Placing a chair for his newly-formed friend, Mr. Boulware spoke:

"This is almost as much my office as the one I have down town. In fact, I reckon I do more business here than there. But that don't count. You want to know why I thought of playing the clown over yonder?"

"Now, if you hold the slightest objection, sir. I merely thought—"

Arlington broke off as his host gave a short, odd laugh, through which echoed precious little mirth, however.

"It's town talk long ere this, I haven't a doubt; so why should you be an exception?" he spoke almost harshly.

"Just as best suits yourself, sir."

With an evident effort Leonard Boulware regained his self-control, sitting for a few seconds in silence, hands clasping temples as his head bowed over. Then, rising erect, he spoke calmly enough.

"The entire trouble started over a partly developed mine owned by a fellow named Moses Grinberg, and which he called the Hot Stuff."

"On which you hold an option?" asked the sport.

"Of which you heard mention while we were in limbo yesterday?"

"Yes. Excuse me, though. I really didn't mean to interrupt you."

"No harm done, I assure you. In fact, as you see, I find it no easy matter to find a suitable beginning to my story, now I've undertaken to explain it all."

"The owner of this claim: Grinberg, you said?"

"Moses Grinberg, yes."

"German or Jew?"

"Neither. That is, he may be of German descent, but no one would discover as much through his speech or his personal appearance."

"What sort of man is he? Not the one you suspected of—eh?"

"No, no!" quickly cried Boulware, with shake of head to suit. "A far different person from that. Grinberg's all right, I reckon, so far as personal honesty goes. Of course, he'd do all a man might to call off the bargain, but I hardly think he'd stop on the wrong side of the law."

"It is a bargain, then?"

"If I can close it—yes. A great bargain; so great that I wouldn't take double the price and call it square!"

"It must be Hot Stuff, for a fact."

"It is. And it happened like this," said Boulware, once more calming down and speaking quietly. "The claim was promising from the very first, although I've handled many a prospect equally as good, out of which I barely cleared my fair commission."

"It's my business—dealing in mining stock, you understand? And so I made more than one offer for the Hot Stuff, always being refused until one day, now nearly seven weeks ago. Then Grinberg set his figures at an even fifty thousand,

and I took a sixty-day option on the mine."

"Which still holds good, then?"

"Yes. Time will be up on the 19th."

"That gives you eight days. Go on, please."

"Less than a week after our agreement was signed, Grinberg put in a series of shots which changed the situation right smartly; for the facts leaked out in spite of his efforts to cover all over."

"Struck it rich, eh?"

"Opened the main vein, if all that's told is true, yes!"

"Sure it isn't a trick, though?" asked the Hotspur.

"Not that. If it was meant for a bait, why does Grinberg try to buy my bargain? Why does he throw every possible difficulty in the way of a fair settlement?"

"He does all that, then?"

"Yes. I've offered him three-fifths down in cash, with perfectly good notes for the balance, but no! He holds by the contract, and that reads—look for yourself, then!"

Arlington scanned the document with growing interest for a few minutes, finding it exactly as represented; and when he returned the paper his host spoke on, rapidly:

"Grinberg holds that it means actual cash, and refuses to accept anything in lieu. I have thirty thousand in notes and gold, ready and waiting. I brought the rest part way to town, but the Punch and Judy outfit jumped all over us, and when the racket was past I was twenty thousand out!"

"They got the money?"

"Every dollar of it, and then cursed me for daring to travel that route without a more liberal supply of small change! Confound it! I was hard hit enough, yet—well, when the scoundrel who sails under the title of Major Punch came at me like that, I just had to laugh at his infernal impudence!"

"And you tried it after a different fashion to-day?"

"Yes. I thought I might have better luck, for once, but—well, you saw how it all panned out. My disguise wasn't worth a cent, and my good money went—over the dump!"

"You had it hidden in the meal sack, didn't you say?"

Boulware nodded assent.

"Yes. I hoped to come through without trouble, for I gave out that I was confined to my house with rheumatism; an old complaint of mine, as about all the town knows."

"Still, knowing, as I surely did, how everybody seemed to be bent on spoiling my little speculation in the Hot Stuff, I took that extra precaution, knowing that in case I should run against the Punch and Judy outfit they would be more apt to search my rags than my baggage."

Arlington was frowning a bit by this time, pinching lower lip between thumb and forefinger, a puzzled light in his eyes beneath their partly closed lids.

After a brief silence he spoke, abruptly:

"There's one thing puzzles me, sir. As I was coming along I noticed a bank building. Isn't that doing business, now?"

Boulware nodded his head, frowning more darkly than ever.

"Well, in that case, couldn't you have gathered in the lacking cash with far less risk and danger, sir?"

"By draft, you mean?"

"Yes. You raised the money on the outside, plainly enough, since you had it in solid cash, twice over. Why not have bought exchange, sent it here through the mail, then laughed at Major Punch and his sweet-scented outfit?"

"Simply because that would have called for a favor—or something like a favor—from a fellow whom I hate worse than the rankest poison! And rather than be under even the shadow of an obligation to Earl Chonister, I'd lose all

chance of owning the Hot Stuff, even though I knew it would pan out tenfold its present worth!"

CHAPTER VIII.

WHO IS CAPTAIN JUDY?

Hotspur Hal gave a low whistle at this vigorous explosion, through which he caught a far better understanding of the case than he had up to that moment won.

"And this same Earl Chonister has dealings with Dick Fitchner, isn't it?" he coolly asked, after a brief silence.

Again Mr. Boulware gave assent through a nod of his head.

"Yes. And—of course, this is all between man and man, though?"

"I'll hold any confidence you may see fit to repose in me secret as the grave, sir," came the swift assurance.

"All right. It's coming to a point in the game when I feel that two heads are better than one, and that without some such good man as yourself to back me up, I'll lose the whole business—if nothing worse than that!"

"How, worse?"

"Well, my life, perhaps!"

"You surely can't mean it, sir?"

"I mean precisely that, and I have fair reasons for my belief, too. Let them pass for just now; later on will serve. And—about this dandy banker of ours!"

"As I said, he is called Earl Chonister. A fair-looking fellow, so far as outward looks go. In fact, many would hold him up as a model of masculine grace, strength, and beauty, but for me—pah!"

Leonard Boulware cleared throat and spat over shoulder like one striving to get rid of an unpleasant flavor.

"You're not in love with the gentleman, I infer?" quietly ventured the Man from Hard Luck. "Any especial reasons, or merely on general principles?"

"Both. I never did fancy the fellow from the start. Not that he gave me any particular reasons—then!"

"But he did, later on?"

"I'll tell you, then you can judge for yourself, Mr. Arlington. In my business, as a matter of course, large sums are passing through my hands, and up to a few months ago nearly all of my financial affairs were transacted through Chonister's bank."

"I never liked him as a man, and never looked upon him as even a passing friend. Then, all at once, he grew still more obnoxious to me, because he rarely let an evening pass without dropping in here."

"I warrant he felt he had a mighty fair excuse, though!" murmured the Hotspur, with a fleeting smile.

"Of course, that was his excuse—the scoundrel! And when I couldn't stand it any longer, I gave him a hint; pointed enough, even if it wasn't an actual kick."

"He took it, after a fashion. But instead of living up to the letter of my hint, he haunted Cora whenever she left this place, until—well, the end came when Major Punch held me up the first time."

"You surely don't think Banker Chonister had aught to do with that case of robbery, though?"

"Wait, please. After that, seeing that I had both open and secret competitors in the fight for the Hot Stuff, I choked down my dislike and—like an infernal fool!—went to the bank and asked for the twenty thousand on my personal note!"

"That was plain business, and nothing to feel ashamed of, surely."

"I was made to feel worse than ashamed of it, though!" with bitter emphasis. "Chonister was all smiles and smirks, hearing me through, and even admitting that the security I offered—the Hot Stuff paper among others—was gilt-edged."

"Yet he refused the money?"

"He agreed to advance it on my unsupported word, provided I would agree to—let him marry my daughter, confound him!"

"He carries his cheek with him, doesn't he?"

"I came mighty near spoiling the looks

of it, just then; I would, only for the counter between, too! As it was—well, now you can see pretty well why I wouldn't even think of taking money from that—place!"

"You refused the honor of his alliance, of course?"

"In round terms, too!"

"And—excuse me, please! Miss Boulware, herself?"

"Is my daughter," proudly declared the mining speculator, waving a hand, as though to dismiss that portion of the subject, once for all.

Somewhat unaccountably, even to himself, Arlington felt a strong interest in that particular phase of the matter, but he could not well do other than accept the dismissal, at least for the time being.

Leonard Boulware spoke on, recalling various incidents, trifling in themselves, yet when taken in connection with other known facts, forming a fairly formidable array of proof that he had secret enemies at work against his hopes of securing the coveted mining property.

"Of course, Grinberg will stall me off if practicable," he added, with more natural quietude. "I can't fault him for that, since I'd act precisely the same in his place. But I'm kicking against this infernal underhand work!"

"Like that of the hold-up, for instance?"

"That, too, although you mayn't just see the matter in my light. If there wasn't treachery afoot, how came the gang to be on the watch for me yesterday?"

"They took Dutch and myself in, though."

"Because they were looking for a man in disguise, and couldn't take time to see first whether or no 'twas their game. Understand?"

"Your view of it, yes. Then you really think that Major Punch has his spies, allies, cappers, right here in Hardshell?"

"That, or even worse. What's to hinder his being a resident? No one has ever seen his face, unless it may be his particular associates on the road. He might rub against your shoulder at any turn, and you never be one whit the wiser!"

"I'm willing to grant all that, too. If I was inclined to doubt the practicability, my little scrap with Dick Fitchner this morning would offer proof to the contrary."

"You believe he was one of the gang, then?"

"I feel morally sure of that much. I believe he was one of the three men left over us when Captain Judy slipped off to see what sort of racket the major was having with you."

Leonard Boulware gave a short, dry chuckle, then spoke in lowered tones, as he leaned a bit closer to his guest:

"And Dick Fitchner has been employed by Earl Chonister to do more than one job in the last few months. You asked me a bit ago—"

"What?" with a slight start as of genuine surprise. "You surely can't think that his—eh?"

"I do, all the same," with dogged nod of head and squaring of jaws. "I believe that Earl Chonister is the Major Punch who has been stirring up this section so nastily of late!"

A brief silence, during which the two men looked at each other in quickened interest. Then the Hotspur spoke:

"Of course, you may be all in the right of it, sir. As a newcomer, I can't say either yes or no, but—one thing, first?"

"What is it?"

"How about the other? If Chonister is the major, who is Captain Judy?" slowly, meaningly, asked the Sport.

If he had anticipated a somewhat similar sensation, Arlington was disappointed, for his host frowned blackly, shaking head in puzzled fashion.

"Now you have got me! I've racked my brain over that question time and time again, but always with the same result: I don't know! Wish I did!"

"Chonister has no female relatives, then?"

"No. He boards at the hotel where you are lodging. Right or wrong, he poses in Hardshell as the sole scion; the last of his race. Good thing for his race, too, I take it!"

Beyond all room for doubting, Mr. Boulware was strongly prejudiced against the Hardshell banker, but Hotspur Hal was shrewd enough to make a fair allowance for that very prejudice.

In days gone by he had learned sufficient not to take too much for granted, and while saying naught to offend his newly formed friend, he was determined to withhold final judgment until he had a fair opportunity for studying this character himself.

"Does this Chonister lean toward the sporty side of life, as it is in the wild and woolly jungle?" asked the Sport.

"Nothing beyond the ordinary," admitted Boulware. "Of course, he takes an occasional drink, and joins in a game at odd intervals; but, to give the devil his due, Chonister is no regular tough."

"And with no feminine relatives to fill the shoes of Captain Judy? Yet, if he is the major, somebody plays Judy!"

"I merely know that the infernal gang moves under a couple of heads, and that one of them is a woman. Beyond that I'm all at sea."

As he spoke these words, the speculator gave himself a vigorous shake, brushing a hand across his face, as though clearing away lingering shadows.

He hitched his chair a bit closer his guest, placing hand on arm with a firm grip, as he spoke, in clear, if lowered, tones.

"Now to sober business, Mr. Arlington. If I'm not mistaken, you're a sort of roving sport, caring little what risks you run just so you live on the top shelf and have plenty of amusement. Am I wrong?"

"You are right as right, Mr. Boulware. Go on, please."

"Good! Now—listen. I am at my last card. I've lost an even forty thousand dollars in cold cash since taking that option of the Hot Stuff. The Punch and Judy gang got the whole of it, not counting what loose change they found in my clothes at the same time."

"Enough to make any man kick against the crooked luck, too."

"You know how the last twenty vanished. Of course, those devils found it. Now—unless I can recover that money—well, I'll give you the entire sum if you can contrive to recover it!"

Instead of betraying amazement at this munificent offer, Hotspur Hal let his smile glide into a low, musical laugh, leaning back in his chair, as he gazed into that frowning face, to lightly drawl:

"Are my bristles so awfully evident, dear sir?"

Leonard Boulware flushed a bit, but quickly gave assurance:

"Of course not, sir. Don't mistake my meaning so entirely, please."

"Then you were in actual earnest?"

"Never more so in all my life. If I get hold of the Hot Stuff through your agency, I can well afford to pay that sum as reward, for my profits will be at least—"

"Never mind that part of it, please," deftly cut in the Hotspur. "And if you fail to get the mine, even though I recover the cash?"

"You're welcome to the pile, just the same. I can afford to pay something for revenge, and if you will close with my proposition—"

"Well, we'll let that point wait for a bit. As for the revenge part of it, I'm with you there, heart and hand. Of course, I didn't lose any such pile as you dropped, but they took my last dollar in sight. And a fellow's pile is a fellow's pile, don't you know?"

"My pocketbook is open for your needs, Mr. Arlington."

"Thanks, awfully. But I never take

wages before earning them, so I beg to be excused. How long does your option run, again?"

"Until midnight on the 19th."

"Which gives you eight full days, counting this one in. Good enough! One ought to make quite a hustle in that length of time. But for now—reckon I might as well be on the move, pardner."

"What's your hurry? At least say that my offer is accepted?"

"See you about that later, sir. Just now I've got to try my new guns out. When a fellow needs them out here, he needs 'em mighty bad, and needs 'em just right. So—must go see how the sights loom up!"

CHAPTER IX.

HOTSPUR HAL TESTS HIS NEW GUNS.

As though reluctant to part with his new ally so soon, Leonard Boulware was a little slow about rising from his seat, but when he did so he mechanically glanced through the window in front, to give start and low ejaculation as he caught sight of a tall, well-dressed man moving in that direction.

"Talk of the devil! That's the very fellow himself!" he declared, in none too amiable tones, flinging a hand toward the window.

The Sport from Hard Luck followed gesture with his eyes, taking swift note of the man without, giving a brief nod as he spoke:

"Good enough! I'll have a fair squint at my pretty fellow, and that without seeming to take the trouble. So-long, pardner. And good luck attend our little game from now on!"

With this hurried farewell, Arlington took his departure, strolling leisurely along, like one who has no very urgent business on hand, and precious few cares to worry him in this everyday world.

He saw that the speculator's house was the evident destination of this fair-looking fellow, and with all outward carelessness the Sport was taking a clear photograph of Earl Chonister in his mind.

Nothing at all of the typical thug in his appearance, and still less aught that favored the conventional Shylock or bargainer in fair feminine flesh and blood.

To the contrary: a tall, graceful, athletic fellow, yet on the sunny side of his third decade, whose swarthy skin glowed with clear health, whose black eyes met gaze squarely, whose jetty mustache curled in a pleasant smile, as well-kept hand acknowledged that meeting with an easy gesture, in keeping with light nod of head in passing.

Hotspur Hal did not turn head for another look, but that photograph was very distinct as he walked on, not directly toward the business portion of Hardshell, but in a course which, if followed long enough, would convey him to the ruder outskirts.

"Road-agent, eh?" mused the Sport, busily. "I'd sooner take him for superintendent of a Sabbath school! And yet—he's just the right build for Major Punch, and with that handsome mug hidden back of a cloth mask—well, it's a mighty pretty little affair, take it by-and-large; a mighty pretty little affair!"

Giving a careless swing of shoulders and head, Arlington flashed a glance to the rear, seeing Earl Chonister standing at the front door, just as that swung open, with knob in hand of the speculator himself.

"Two to one the fellow gets inside if I knew it!"

For just then the Hardshell banker crossed the threshold of the man who had so recently been reviling him with all possible bitterness!

"That's odd—or would be if a fellow didn't stop to reflect that every story has its other side!" mentally commented the Sport, as he kept on his way. "Wonder if Chonister is such an awful scoundrel, after all? Or, is the old gentleman

just a weenty bit—cracked on that one point?"

With the decision that both of these points might prove well worth the trouble of thorough analysis when he had the time to spare, Hotspur Hal banished the matter for the time being, devoting his whole care and attention to the proposed test of his newly acquired battery.

So far he had encountered none other than the Hardshell banker, and he was just at the edge of the town, with a barren tract of rocky ground lying just ahead; a most suitable range for target practice such as he contemplated.

"Always supposing the racket doesn't set the town on fire!"

Still, that was a risk he had to run, the only alternative being to pass clear beyond ear range; and that would take too much time, as well as being entirely too much trouble.

"Business is business, and just now it's my business to see just how much I've got for my good money," muttered the Sport while selecting his ground for that practice. "It's even money that I'll have to burn powder in good earnest before seeing the last of this Punch and Judy affair, and if so—well, a fellow wants to know just how his guns throw their fodder; yes!"

Here and there grew stunted trees amid that barren tract, and picking out one where the ground was fairly level, Arlington pinned a playing card against the gnarled trunk, then leisurely measured off an even score of paces, keeping the forenoon sun at his back.

Far enough for testing sights, and that's what I'm after; not trying to show off in fancy marksmanship before an enthusiastic audience," the Hotspur murmured, while taking his position and drawing his pistols.

He was "all business" now, forgetting everything save that one all-important point, standing in an easy position, but firm as a rock, save for right hand, as it rose steadily to cover yonder card, pausing for a brace of seconds to hold immovable aim, then firing.

In swift succession, shot followed shot, until the weapon was empty and a little cloud of bluish vapor overhung the spot.

Throwing open the pistol and ejecting the empty shells, blowing through the barrel, then deftly inserting fresh cartridges as he strode toward the twisted cedar, Hotspur Hal frowned and gave an impatient murmur. For the card still showed as before, untouched by any one of the six bullets sent that way.

He found them closely bunched, almost a foot below the card, and gave grim nod of head as he covered them with the tips of three fingers.

"In true line, but the same old story! I never knew the firm to turn out a poor or imperfect weapon, but—why in time can't they regulate the sights at the factory? Why put on a knife-edge that a giraffe couldn't stride over? Why—well, better too high than too low!"

Returning to his former station, Hotspur Hal tested his second gun, with almost precisely the same result; the weapon shot true to line, but in drawing a fine sight would throw the lead inches too low at twenty paces.

Satisfied with this preliminary test, which only confirmed his past experience with those otherwise perfectly finished arms, Arlington produced a small file, with which to eat away sufficient of the silver sights in front, but giving an impatient grunt as he caught sight of several men hurrying that way from town.

"I knew it! The Yahoos couldn't hear a bit of barking without—well, just so they give me elbow room enough to—"

"Hellow, thar, you feller!" came a hurried hail from the citizen in the lead, a tall, gaunt, stoop-shouldered man of probably fifty years of age, who carried a weather-beaten and time-worn Winchester repeater, as though both eager and ready to make good use of it.

"Whar's the circus, an' who's a-doin' of it, aryhow?"

"Good-morning, sir! Sorry to disappoint you, pardner, but the fact is just like them: Trying out my new guns, to get their sights down to business level."

"Waal, by jinks!" with an echo of almost ludicrous disgust. "Ef I didn't 'low thar was a he-ole rubidunkus bu'sted loose all over this yer way! An' it's only a critter—waal, waal, now! An' how do she throw the blue pills, pardner?"

"Too low, as all Smith & Wessons will, first-off. I've been doing a bit of filing, and now—any objections to my trying it over, friends?"

By this time something like a dozen men, all drawn to the spot by the truly national love of a free show, were watching operations, while still other citizens were on the way.

As a matter of course, no objections were raised, the marksman being given ample room in which to show his skill, and for something like half an hour the Hotspur buckled down to work, now filing, now firing, all the time drawing nigher perfection, until at last he planted his six shots all neatly bunched inside the playing card.

Without paying heed to the murmurs of approval, Arlington reloaded that weapon, putting it up in favor of its mate, speaking indifferently:

"'Twill answer for rough work, I reckon, and I can put the finer touches on later. They're all the same; good as the best, save in that one respect. But—why not make a good work perfect, to start with?"

The man with the Winchester—Sam Hockett, as he introduced himself—took a strong interest in this practice, now and then letting fall word or hint which showed he knew what he was talking about, and at the same time favorably impressed Arlington.

Now, while most of the others were at the cedar, inspecting the little patches cut up by the bullets, or placing a fresh target, he spoke in guarded tones to the Sport:

"You're gittin' thar, fur's your guns goes, pardner, but you want to keep all eyes open jest the same!"

"Is that so?"

"You bet yer sweet life that's so! Fer why: I seed you thump that ornery cuss, Dick Fitchner, back yender, an' him—waal, now, boss, Dick hain't never gwine fer to stan' up afore ye for a fa'r fought; no, he jest hain't, now!"

"So much the easier on my stock of ammunition, isn't it?"

"But a mighty sight rougher onto the back o' ye in a dark night! An' that's jest what's the matter, pardner! Dick'll play even ef it takes all the hide off, nur you won't git a weenty word o' warnin' afore he makes his jump, nuther; you won't!"

Hotspur Hal was keen enough judge of human nature to realize that this was a whole-souled bit of good will, and gave firm grip of hand by way of thanks to the man with the Winchester.

More than that, just then, neither man wished to risk, for the other citizens were moving their way, leaving a fresh target in readiness for another series of shots.

Those quickly followed, and after them another test when the daintily handled file had done its work.

Again the playing card caught the six bullets, and feeling fairly well satisfied with himself, so far, Hotspur Hal called forth:

"Set up another card, please, gentlemen, and I'll see if I've clean forgot how to play double triggers!"

But it was not to be, for as the Sport was left standing alone, the spiteful report of a rifle rung forth, and Arlington reeled with a sharp cry, to fall at full length as two more shots followed in swift succession.

CHAPTER X.

THE UP-TO-DATE SPORT COUNTS A SCORE.

Startled cries broke from the citizens at this totally unexpected event, and more than one of them shrunk back, seemingly on the point of breaking away in headlong flight as though fearful for their own safety.

Not so with honest Sam Hockett, the man with the Winchester.

He heard the shot, and flashed eyes that way, catching sight of a tiny puff of gray vapor far across yonder among the rocks, but at that same instant, seeing the Hotspur Sport stagger like a man sharp hit.

The other shots followed with such rapidity that it seemed no one gun could possibly have vomited forth the viciously humming lead, yet the smoke puffs came from precisely the same covert.

Hockett gave angry cry and sprung forward, just as the Sport partly whirled around, to stagger and fall as though shot through the heart or through brain.

But no mortally stricken man could have so swiftly recovered himself, and it certainly was not a corpse which rolled over and scrambled nimbly to feet, dashing one hand across eyes to clear vision even as he called out:

"Show me where—show me the dirty whelp of Satan who dared to hit me behind my back?"

"Yender—thar!" cried Hockett, pointing toward the rocky ambush from whence those treacherous shots had been sped.

That was enough for the Hotspur. He caught sight of the rapidly fading smoke, and only pausing long enough to catch up the revolvers which had dropped from his hand when he fell, partly from the bullet, which had cut a shallow channel through his scalp, but mainly through a loose stone giving way beneath his foot as he tried to whirl and face the enemy, he gave an ugly growl and rushed that way.

Sam Hockett was fully as prompt to take action, but the others hung in the wind a couple of seconds; long enough to see that no shots came to check that reckless charge.

After that they were eager enough, shouting to the full as vengefully as either one of their immediate leaders in that rush.

"Keep back!" fiercely cried the now thoroughly enraged Sport from Hard Luck, as he caught those yells. "He's my meat! Leave him to me or I'll—man to man, you infernal cur!" he cried, sending his voice ahead in hopes of thus turning his unseen enemy to bay.

But not a sound came from the rocks. Not another shot was fired, nor could one of the little company catch sight or sound of the foiled assassin.

"Made a run fer it, the darn critter!" panted Hockett, as he reached the cover, only a yard or two behind the Sport. "Ef ever I was—"

"Yonder—yonder he goes!" cried Arlington, in savage disappointment as he caught sight of a human figure just blending with that of a bay horse.

"Whar—who is he—why don't ye—critter-back, by gum!" spluttered the man with the Winchester, surging far enough forward to sight the same objects.

"Too far—too long a pull for a revolver!" added the Sport in fierce disappointment as he saw his enemy spurred into swifter flight, at the same time turning head to look backward as a man will who knows dangerous chase is being given.

"A nigger, by thunder!" exploded Hockett, as he saw this. "Black a mug as ever I see on ary—thunder!"

For Arlington snatched the Winchester from his grasp, springing forward a couple of paces to drop on knees beside one of the gray rocks, leveling the rifle over the boulder and bringing the double sights to bear upon that far-away figure.

It seemed too long a pull for even a

Winchester of that calibre, but 'twas the forlorn hope which each fleeting second lessened in geometrical degree.

Only a brace of seconds did it require to secure the best possible aim, but that almost infinitesimal space of time seemed an age to those breathless witnesses.

Then the trigger was drawn, and as the weapon barked, Hotspur Hal sprung to his feet the more surely to clear that curl of smoke and see how surely his lead had been winged.

The fugitive assassin suddenly straightened up in sadde, tossing both arms in frantic gesture, then pitching sideways off his nag, striking the flinty ground heavily and rolling over and over as the unburdened horse sped on at doubled pace.

"Whooray!" fairly screamed Sam Hockett, flinging his battered and greasy felt high in air. "Punched him right whar he lives, or—whooray fer gun an' double whooray fer shooter!"

It seemed almost like a miracle, considering the distance and the fact that the living target was in swiftly irregular motion at the time; but Hotspur Hal never stopped to give or receive congratulations, springing ahead at the best pace he could command where the ground was so difficult to cover.

Hockett and the other citizens followed suit, none pausing until at the spot where the unseated horseman lay, covered with dirt, garments torn by his ugly fall, and face hidden beneath a mask of black cloth!

"One o' the Punch an' Judy outfit or I'm a liar!" cried Hockett in wide-eyed amazement. "Waal, now, ef I ever—no I never!"

With face hard set and pale beyond the ordinary, Hotspur Hal looked on while the dead man was being handled, for that he was dead not one could entertain the faintest doubt after the first glimpse.

The mask was removed, and the pain-drawn visage exposed to view.

A brief scrutiny, then one of the citizens cried out:

"I've seen him afore this! I think—yes! Over at Capsheap!"

"His name is Zack Grebe," contributed Hockett. "I knowed him long afore I come to Hardshell. Nur I never didn't know ary good o' him, nuther; an' that's a blessed fact, too!"

"Well, he's done ketched his last sickness this round, aryhow! An' a cracker-jack shot I never did see sence I was pupped; no, sir!"

"Whar'd he ketch it, Sam?" asked another of the men from Hard Luck. "Thar's whar he done lit onto his cabeza, but—the lead, man?"

Still the Sport from Hard Luck maintained silence, taking no part in that curious examination, looking grave and even sad.

Sam Hockett rolled the corpse over, looking for mark of bullet. He found it right speedily, finger tip tracing the cut in scalp, which told where the lead had touched, and then gave a half-disgusted cry as he caught that head and lifted body far enough to shake it from side to side.

"Waal, by gosh! Jest a weenty graze like that! An' him—I say, boss!"

"What is it? Surely not—speak up, man, dear!"

"The blame fool done killed him own self!" disgustedly, once more with that grim illustration. "See! You jest sort o' creased the critter, an' he dumped out onto his cabeza, to break his fool neck, sure!"

Hotspur Hal stooped to assure himself of this fact—for fact it proved to be—then drew back with a breath of no slight relief.

"I'm glad of that," he said, in lowered tones. "Somehow I felt like an assassin myself, shooting a man while fleeing, and—"

"That be blamed!" exploded Sam Hockett. "Zack Grebe never was a man, nur anything like a man! An' ef

he was, double times over, didn't he try fer to drap you out o' kiver? An' that ahind the back o' ye, too?"

Hotspur Hal gave a little cry and stooped over the dead man once more, then drew from his belt a brace of revolvers, giving a brief laugh of pleasure as he made sure his eyes had not played him false.

"My guns—my dainty little pets!" he cried, in actual glee, such as only a thoroughbred sport can fully appreciate, as he fondled the guns. "That settles it, then! He was one of the Punch and Judy outfit, and fairly deserved his fate!"

"That's mighty right, too! An' them is your old guns, boss?"

"My old tools, yes! Now that I've found them again, these others—whoever will look after this cold meat can have the guns as pay."

Hotspur Hal dropped the recently tested pistols upon the corpse, then turned away as though he held no further interest in the matter.

More hands than one made eager grasp for the tools, but Sam Hockett secured them both, and promptly clenched his claim by crying out:

"That's all right, boss; I'll do the 'tend-in' to, don't you worry over it, now! I knowed Zack Grebe fer a heap o' while, nur I never didn't know ary good o' the blame critter, nuther!"

Satisfied that the body would receive fairly decent treatment, and feeling considerably more at ease in mind since learning just how the road-agent came by his death, Arlington moved slowly away through the thick-lying rocks, heading for the cedar tree against whose trunk he had pinned his card targets.

He was scarcely aware of what he was doing, or whither his steps were tending, for brain was over-busy just then, striving to clear a way through the thickening mists.

What had he done to cause that lawless outfit to centre upon himself as a fitting subject for capital punishment.

"First, Dick Fitchner, now Zack Grebe! I could almost take oath they belong to the Punch and Judy outfit, and—am I marked for death simply because I've openly declared my intention to play even for being robbed in that hold-up?"

With thoughts thus engaged, Hotspur Hal crossed over to near the practice ground, then giving a start at sound of footstep, looking up to catch sight of John Halliboober!

"Ach! I vhas loogink me oudt vor you, und—cracious cootness!"

For Hotspur Hal jerked out a revolver and caught the drop with bewildering swiftness as he sternly cried out:

"Hands up, you infernal scoundrel!"

CHAPTER XI.

A PECULIAR INTERVIEW.

After all, it is not just the easiest matter in the world to bluff a man who will not be bluffed.

Leonard Boulware opened his portal with the grim determination to give the banker of Hardshell such a cool reception that he would be only too glad to beat a retreat far less dignified than was his advance; but Earl Chonister seemed to look at the matter in an entirely different light.

"Good-morning, my dear sir," was his brisk salutation, ignoring completely that dark frown and repellent expression of face. "Thanks! I will step inside for a moment, since you're so kind as to—thanks!"

It was not exactly a shove which sent the speculator back sufficiently far, yet just as certainly no invitation was given, but, nevertheless, Earl Chonister did cross that threshold, and as he did so both his hands closed over one of his host's, shaking it most cordially.

"I have wanted to see you, my dear sir, ever since the first rumor of this truly unfortunate affair came to my ears," earnestly declared the banker, his dark eyes glowing with sympathy such

as ought to be very grateful to one in trouble, but which—

Leonard Boulware jerked his hand free, recoiling a bit, then gruffly speaking:

"My office is down town, sir. I never admit any here save intimate friends, who are not—"

"No one of whom can more highly appreciate the honor, my dear sir!" cried Chonister, dark face fairly beaming with pleasure. "There was one time when I began to fear you weren't quite—er—but I can't bear to mention such a thing, even yet!"

"If you want to see me on business—"

"There is no time like the present, of course; thanks! And Miss Cora is—I trust she is very well, indeed?"

Leonard Boulware gave a surly growl at this piece of sublime impudence as he considered it, and for a brief space it really began to look as though Mr. Chonister had ventured a step too far.

"None the better for your asking, Earl Chonister! And—leave her name out of the question unless you're honing for a row!"

"With you, my dear sir?" those jetty brows arching in dismay. "Not for all the world! I surely meant no harm by asking—"

"Drop it, I tell you!" came the sharper warning, as the mining speculator turned toward his "snuggery," instead of flinging wide the front door and kicking the fellow out, as he would have vowed to do, only a few brief minutes before.

Meek as Moses looked the handsome banker as he followed his irate host from the room, but in his dark eyes was a laughing twinkle which would have told tales had Leonard Boulware caught a fair expression of them.

It was foot nearly as much as hand that opened the second door, and a very sour-looking host who paused for guest to pass through in advance, but Earl Chonister had a certain point to win in the queer game then being played, and he smiled like one thoroughly satisfied with the way the cards were running.

Taking a seat where his face was cast somewhat into shadow, the younger man waited for his host to be seated, then spoke in what was meant to be a sympathetic tone of voice:

"I am very, very sorry to hear of your recent misfortune, Mr. Boulware, and couldn't resist the temptation to fetch my heartfelt sympathy. The loss would be hard enough for any man to bear, unless—by the way, which report is the true one, sir?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, there are so many wild rumors afloat, you know! One says you lost ten thousand dollars, another doubles, then multiples it until—you understand? I really reckon you are the only one in Hardshell who can give the actual facts, Mr. Boulware."

"Don't forget the one who—don't forget yourself, Earl Chonister!" harshly cried the speculator, dislike winning the upper hand of ordinary prudence.

The banker gave a slight start, brows arching in surprise.

"I don't exactly follow your meaning, my dear sir," he expostulated.

Leonard Boulware broke into a short, sneering laugh, then spoke on:

"You don't, eh? A lie wouldn't begin to choke you, either, would it?"

"Sir?"

"That's all right, too! What else is it, pray?"

"What on earth do you mean, Mr. Boulware?"

"That you know a mighty sight more about both hold-up and lost money than I can tell you; just that, sir!" vigorously declared the mining speculator, fetching clenched fist upon table with resonant thump.

"That I do?"

"That Major Punch does, and that's a distinction without any difference. Now, do you catch on, Earl Chonister?"

That handsome face flushed hotly, then

paled, white hands clenching as though in sudden anger, but a moment later all smoothed over, and the Hardshell banker even laughed briefly.

"If words mean anything, sir, yours mean that I am—bah!" with quick gesture of hand. "The bare idea is too utterly ridiculous!"

"That's all right, if you can only prove it right, Earl Chonister," doggedly persisted the elder man. "Maybe I'm 'way off my base, but, all the same, I'm open to lay odds that you wipe your lips every time Major Punch takes a drink, so there!"

Chonister gazed steadily into that flushed face, eyes meeting eyes without flinching on either side for a half-score seconds. Then the banker parted lips to sharply ejaculate:

"Are you gone crazy, sir?"

"Not quite. I know just what I'm saying, and I stand responsible for each and every word that crosses my lips. Understand?"

A very thinly-veiled menace, this, but Earl Chonister showed no particular haste to pick up the gauntlet.

He leaned back in his chair, one hand briefly smoothing his neatly kept mustache, then dropping away to his lap. There was a faint gleam of white teeth in amused smile before the younger man spoke in his turn:

"If 'twas any other man hinting at such a thing, Mr. Boulware, I most certainly would call him—if not crazy, the—other thing!"

"Fool is it?"

"The word came from your lips, not mine, remember," swiftly spoke the banker, "but any milder term would scarcely fit the idea. What? I Major Punch? I, the author of all the recent hold-ups?"

"I believe it—upon my very soul, I believe you are that infernal scoundrel, Earl Chonister!"

It really looked as though serious trouble was brewing, but it takes at least two to make a quarrel interesting, and nothing was further from the banker's intentions or wish, just then, to really fall out with his present host.

He made a deprecatory gesture, speaking with quiet earnestness:

"I am sorry—extremely sorry, to find you have such a poor opinion of my honor and probity, Mr. Boulware, but we really cannot afford to quarrel over such a trifle."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded the speculator. "After what has passed between us—not to mention what I've just said—why are you here, unless to quarrel?"

"On a matter of business in which we hold a mutual interest," was the prompt reply. "I know that you have taken a powerful dislike to me of late—"

"With mighty good reasons, too!"

"And I would hardly have ventured here without an invitation had there been less important interests at stake," evenly pursued Chonister.

"What are you trying to get at, anyway?"

"Simply this: You hold an option on the Hot Stuff—"

"What business is that of yours, pray?"

"None at all, sir, unless you are willing to grant that much," with a bland smile. "Allow me to say my say, please?"

"Go on. Cut it short, though."

"Thanks. As I started to say, you hold an option on the claim now owned by Moses Grinberg. I have taken a strong fancy to that same bit of property, you understand—"

"Don't you wish you may get it, though?"

"I really would like it, yes," with imperturbable good nature. "And as a possible inducement to you, sir, I wish to make an offer. May I?"

"What is it?"

"This: You paid two hundred dollars

down for a sixty-day option at fifty thousand. Am I correct, Mr. Boulware?"

"Near enough. Go on."

"Thanks. Now I'll give you one thousand in cash and take the option off your hands. As a pure matter of business, of course."

The speculator made a gesture of contempt, lips curling as he said:

"Bah! You're too mighty fond of a good thing, Earl Chonister!"

"I really think myself 'twould pay a fair profit," easily admitted the banker. "If otherwise, of course I wouldn't take hold of it as a speculation. And as you will hardly make the option good—"

"Who dares to say I'll not make it good?"

"What? Surely you will not buy the mine, after this?"

"Surely, I will buy the mine!" almost fiercely cried the speculator, with gestures to match his tones. "Ay! I'll make that option a trade in spite of man or devil!"

Past all doubting, Leonard Boulware meant every word that now crossed his lips, but the Hardshell banker was not materially shaken in his opinion, judging from his half-quizzical smile and his next words:

"Of course, no man would better like to see you fall into a good thing, Mr. Boulware, but business is business, and—I'll lay you almost any odds that you never buy out Mose Grinberg!"

The owner of the option sprung from his seat with a low cry of mingled rage and menace, hands gripping chair back as though to utilize that article of furniture as a weapon, then harshly demanding:

"What do you mean by that? Is it a threat, Earl Chonister?"

CHAPTER XII.

ANOTHER, ONLY MORE SO.

If the banker had risen, or made any decided movement, which could possibly have been misconstrued by his irate host, the crisis would have been precipitated right then and there.

Instead Earl Chonister remained quiet, even smiling as with pleasure up into the rage-flushed face of his antagonist.

"A threat?" he echoed, in blandest tones. "Not a bit of it, my dear sir! And—pray resume your seat for a moment, will you?"

"I thought—you offered to bet odds against—"

"I'll explain just why I let slip the words; sorry I did, too, since they seem to have given you fresh offense, Mr. Boulware."

"Why wouldn't they, after—all right!" sinking back into his seat and clenching hands tightly together in his lap as though he thought it best to resist an ugly temptation by those means. "Go on. Finish up the business which brought you here, sir."

"I'm free to admit choosing my words awkwardly, but my meaning was hardly as offensive as you seem to fancy. I merely meant that it is almost impossible to break a streak of ill luck such as you appear to have fallen into of recent days."

"Go on. Finish what you've got to say."

"Very well. I've made you what I consider a fair offer, all things taken into consideration, Mr. Boulware. I met the owner of the Hot Stuff as I was on my way here. Say the word, sir, and I'll go look him up."

"What for, pray?"

"To fetch him here in person, so that we can close the deal without either hitch or hobble. Shall I?"

"Shall you? No!"

"Think twice before you decide finally," urged the banker, face now betraying something of his powerful interest in the matter as the crisis drew near. "There's a fortune in that claim, Mr. Boulware, and I need hardly say that I am willing to share—"

"But I am not!" cried the speculator,

rising to his feet once more, now in a cold rage, which was even more dangerous than his recent spasm of fury.

"I beg of you, sir!" cried Chonister, likewise abandoning his seat.

"Enough—and too much, you scoundrel! There's the door; go! Go, I tell you, or—old and gray-headed as I am, by all the gods of war I'll kick you out!"

Almost any man would have abandoned the field as worse than lost, but Earl Chonister was hardly one of the common herd, and though he had left his chair, he showed no haste to leave the room or house as well.

"Be patient, my dear sir," he spoke, smoothly, with never a show of resentment or of irritation, as he leaned lightly upon the chair back. "Since you positively decline to sell me the option—"

"I'll see you in the bottomless pit first!"

"Of course, that settles it, then," with a smile and bow. "But now I have another proposition to make, and I'll put it into as few words as possible: like this:

"I have ample funds at my disposal, outside of the bank business. I will supply you with as much cash as you desire, provided—"

"Be careful, confound you!"

"Provided you grant my heartfelt prayer," gravely persisted the banker. "I love your daughter—"

"And my daughter hates you—hates you, sir, do you understand?"

Earl Chonister stood motionless before the angry speculator, his handsome face a bit graver than usual, but in no other wise did he betray aught of excitement or of agitation.

A brief silence, then he spoke in cool, even tones:

"I really trust you will excuse me, Mr. Boulware, but I fear you are just the least bit prejudiced against myself. As I said, I love your daughter, and my dearest hope in life is to make her my wife."

"Never, you scoundrel! I'd rather see her dead than—Will you take my answer and—go!"

"No, sir. I'll only take that decision from Miss Boulware's lips," resolutely declared the young banker.

Leonard Boulware turned to the desk which stood near the window, jerking out a drawer from whence he took a revolver, wheeling upon the lover as he harshly cried:

"Now go, I tell you! You're too infernally contemptible to be worth a cartridge, Earl Chonister, but—go, I say! Go, or I'll scatter your brains to the four winds!"

There was no room left for doubting the perfect earnestness of his adversary, now, and like any other wise man, Earl Chonister made the best of a bad bargain.

"All right, since you are so very pressing, my dear sir," he said, lifting hat from table and moving easily toward the door. "I'd awfully hate to be the means—or cause—of hanging the father of—allow me to bid you a very good day, Mr. Boulware!"

Even the irate speculator was forced to admit that the cool fellow was carrying it off in good fashion, but his gun kept Chonister covered during that brief tour to the front door.

Whatever one entirely without prejudice might have thought, Leonard Boulware no longer entertained a reasonable doubt as to the perfect truth of his ugly suspicions.

In his mind, Earl Chonister was indeed Major Punch, but—how to make the rest of the world see with his eyes?

With far greater grace than one would expect, the Hardshell banker made his exit, even going so far as to proffer hand in parting!

Of course, that was labor spent in vain, but the indignant refusal gave Chonister a fair excuse for smile and chuckle as he finally turned his back upon the building and strode easily off in the direction of his own place of business.

Before that place of business was reached, however, Mr. Chonister caught the eyes of a man of middle age in fair good garb, making a covert gesture which caused that worthy to fall in behind and dog his steps to the bank building itself.

As a matter of course, a half-civilized place like Hardshell could hardly be expected to put on metropolitan airs, or business in true metropolitan fashion.

This was an instance which may be cited: Chonister's bank was the only regular financial institution doing business in Hardshell, yet the banker had to unlock the door as he returned from that profitless business call upon Leonard Boulware.

Earl Chonister ran his place of business by himself, and when, as now, he felt drawn away during business hours what more simple than shutting up shop until he could return?

Thus it came to pass, then, that his follower found the banker alone within the building when he came to the now open door.

Glancing that way at sound of footfall Chonister recognized his man, speaking crisply:

"Come in, Grinberg!"

The owner of the Hot Stuff entered, passing through to the rear of the store and wired counter before speaking, glancing around after a furtive fashion, which would hardly have impressed a stranger in his favor.

"Did you git to see him, boss?"

"Boulware? Yes. Don't I always get what I go after, Moses?"

"Then it's all right? You made trade—eh?"

Chonister sunk into his office chair, legs thrust out at full extent, hands clasped in front of his body, hat tipped far enough forward to shade his eyes if not to mask his quizzical smile.

It was a smile that puzzled Moses Grinberg, evidently enough, and he shifted uneasily from one foot to its mate, rubbing hands together with a far from agreeable rasping sound.

"What luck? You said—what luck blame it all?"

"None, my dear fellow; none at all. He swears that he'll make his option good, whether or no, in spite of man or devil, was the way he put it before me," explained the banker.

Moses Grinberg gave a savage gesture, and low, ugly sounds passed through his thick lips. Evidently he had looked for a far different report than this.

"Make it good? But that means—why how kin he? Hain't he jest lost sech a pile—"

"Something like twenty thousand, I believe," with a yawn.

"An' that makes jest double so much, fer he was stuck up afore."

"According to report, that makes forty thousand to the bad," easily admitted the banker, still retaining his careless attitude. "But you don't want to let all that close your eyes, Moses."

"What ye mean, boss?"

"That you'd best lie mighty low for a couple of weeks. That you'd better go hide out in some snug corner until after the option expires, for if Boulware should offer you the hard cash—"

"But—how kin he, losin' so mighty much?"

"Well, Moses, maybe I'm just a weenty bit better posted on some matters than you are, and so—listen: Mr. Boulware has at least half the whole sum safely stowed away in his house, where he can produce it—"

"Why don't you freeze fast to that, too, boss?" interrupted Grinberg, in a guarded whisper, after glancing around to make sure no eavesdroppers were nigh.

Chonister gave a start and frown at the words, speaking sharply:

"Why don't I—why, you idiot! What do you mean, anyway?"

"Augh! Come off your perch, pardner!" insolently retorted Moses, with an impatient yet meaning gesture. "It's

I right to play goody-goody afore the
ess vovd, but when it comes to one who
r cau—
in fai—
gestu—
What I know; that you've bin playin'
ll in Major Punch, an'—

k bur—
Eat those words, you infernal scoun-
ell!" sternly cried Chonister, as he
civili—
ught Grinberg by the throat, shaking
y be—
m violently. "Take that back, you
s, or
lot, or I'll shake daylight clean out of
hion. pu!"

may He flung the fellow off, as Moses
he onrgled an apology, and after the miner
g stuffled out of the bank and away, he
ker howningly muttered:

d fr—
How many others are going to catch
leona—
that fool idea, I wonder?"

CHAPTER XIII.

JOHAN'S SHREWD LITTLE DEAL.

Never in all his life was Hal Arling-
on more powerfully tempted to draw
igger than when he caught the drop on
ohan Halliboober.

With all his off-hand dash and appar-
nt carelessness, the Sport from Hard
uck was a proud man; proud of his
bility to hold his own under any and
ll conditions, and the fact that to this
orse than insignificant looking fellow
he primarily owed his present almost
penniless condition, to say nothing of the
past ignominy of bonds, was peculiarly
stinging.

Then, too, he had been twice assailed
that same forenoon by men whom he
was morally certain belonged to the
same lawless gang for which this sham-
bling scoundrel almost as surely played
capper.

If Johan had made the slightest ef-
fort to draw a weapon in turn, or even
broke away in flight, his fate would have
been sealed past redemption, but instead
—was it pure nerve, or merely another
phase of natural audacity?

Those dingy paws flew up in obedience
to that stern challenge, but head came
forward a bit, little eyes sparkling, and
now-familiar tongue mouthing the words:

"Vail, vail, now, dot is a nice goons,
my vriendt! I giffs you more as five
tollar uff you vhas—"

"And I'll give you a through ticket to
—steady, Dutch! I'd ought to lift your
roof without further parley, you infernal
raud! And I'll do just that, too, unless
you can show fair cause why—steady!"

"Ach! mein coot vriendt! You dalks
me like somepody vhas coink grazy py
meinselluf!" exploded the second-hand
man, still holding up his hands, but uti-
lizing his shoulders to gesture after an
almost ludicrous fashion. "Vor vhy vhas
I get shootet mit a goon, eh? Vhat vhas
I pin doin' py meinselluf all der dimes
when I neffer knowed me dot, eh?"

"You are one of the Punch and Judy
gang that held me up, and—"

"Ach! mein shiminy kee-ristmas!"
exploded the fellow, staring in wide-eyed
amazement for a few seconds, then
breaking into an odd chuckle, which by
no means helped to mend the temper of
the Hotspur.

A brace of swift strides carried Arling-
ton close enough for left hand to grip
throat, pistol muzzle rubbing that hawk-
nosed face as he spoke in coldly fierce
accents:

"Why shouldn't I send you over the
range, you cur? Show good cause, and
that in a hurry, or I'll open your skull
so wide that the sun will make your
teeth ache!"

There was no room left for doubting
his perfect earnestness now, and fool or
knave, Johan realized his imminent peril.

"I vill—I vill dells me efferydinks!"
he spluttered as best he might with those
steel-like fingers closing tighter and more
tightly upon his throat.

Arlington gave him a parting shake,
shoving the fellow back as he relaxed
that vicious grasp.

"See that you do, then! Talk straight,
too. I feel like a fool for not drilling

you at first sight, but—talk a chalk-line,
Johan, or I'll fit you for a high lot on
the hillside, even yet!"

Halliboober gasped a couple of times,
coughing and gingerly fingering his
throat like one in doubt as to its condi-
tion. But with that revolver still staring
him in the face, even he could not af-
ford to waste very much time.

"Und I vhas me—vhat vhas it you say
me I vhas, eh?"

"One of the Punch and Judy outfit, no
less," promptly repeated the Sport from
Hard Luck. "Deny that if you can, and
make your denial good or I'll send you
over the range a-kiting, you scoundrel!"

"I deny me dot all oafar, py dunder und
goons!" exploded the Dutchman, vigor-
ously. "I neffer vhas me so low town
as dot! I neffer vhas me co grazy like
dem—nein, nein!"

"Why did you down me, then? What
made you give me the dump when I was
breaking away, you cur?" fiercely de-
manded the Sport.

Instead of flinching further or betray-
ing fear for the moment, Johan Halli-
boober lifted finger to lip, flashing a wary
glance around, then leaning a bit for-
ward to breathe in a husky whisper:

"Shh! Dot vhas a vine, schmaradt
dricks, nein? Yaw! I dinks me so, ny-
der! Und—vait a pit, mein coot vriendt,
und I vill me makes—like does!"

His other hand was busy about his ill-
fitting garments, and Hotspur Hal was
about to take action lest this odd cus-
tomer might be after a weapon, through
means of which he hoped to turn tables,
but then the paw came forth, holding a
well-worn pocketbook instead.

"What's that? What have you got
there, Dutch?"

Johan gave a low, cracked chuckle,
while flashing another shy look around,
then held forth the purse and spoke:

"Bay dyselluf pack oudt uff dot, mein
coot vriedt!"

"What! What are you trying to get
through yourself, anyway?"

"Youst like dot: I vhas me no plame
scountrel—nein! I vhas me neffer von
uff dose plooty-mintet sphitzboobs—
neffer! Und vhen you say me I gost you
all dose moneys, I say me bay dyselluff
pack!"

"Are you crazy, or only a fool,
Dutchy?" cried the sport, scarcely know-
ing what to say or how to take this
queer customer.

Again Johan chuckled as he swept an-
other precautionary glance around to
make sure they had the stage wholly to
themselves.

"Vell, I vhas me no vools, anyways.
Und I vhas owe me dot much py you; I
owes me youst so much as you lost py
dem vellers vhen dey vhas blay monkeys
all oafar py us—yaw!"

Halliboober uttered these words as one
might who meant all they sought to
convey, and with growing suspicion that
there was even more in this fellow than
he had given him credit for, Arlington
lowered his pistol, though still keeping on
guard.

"You've said too much not to say more,
Dutch," he curtly pronounced. "Out with
it all, as nearly in a lump as you can
twist that thick tongue of yours. Owe
me—how do you mean?"

Although he had never betrayed any
great uneasiness or fear, Johan clearly
felt a bit more at ease without that ugly
muzzle staring him in the face.

That face broadened in a genial smile,
and his tones waxed confidential as he
began his really needed explanation.

"Vell, mein coot vriendt, she vhas
britty much like dose vays: I vhas me
somedinks pedder as I looks py mein
oudtsite—you grap on?"

"Something better?" echoed the puz-
zled Sport.

"Yaw. I vhas tress me booty rough. I
vhas blay me a schunk-schob mans. I
vhas gry oudt I hef me no moneys put a
leedle—like dose dem grazy vools rop

me uff. Und all der dimes I vhas—
shh!"

Johan slid a bit closer, to shield lips
with curved palm as he added in a ghost-
ly whisper:

"All dot vhas a pud-ub schob, you grap
on, mein vriendt? I vhas me no dramps.
I vhas me no segont-handt tealer—nein!
I comes me dis vay oudt to make pig
moneys, you see? I hef me blendy
vealdth, bud I tond't garry dose my
bockets in—no!"

"Vhen dose tuyfels sdop us likt dot, I
hef me tiamonds und odder shewels
sewed ub mein glothes insite uff. Und
so—vell, I dinks me it vouldt pe a
schmaradt drick uff I voolish dem vellers
all oafar, nein?"

"At my expense, is it, you rascal?"

"No, sir, at my expense," chuckled
Johan, again offering his pocketbook to
the Sport. "I safe me does shewels, und
I hurry me py dot pank in Hardtschell.
I make me debosit dose sdone. I giff
dot panker-mans von tiamondt, und he
giffs me halluf bay. I loog me you ub,
und now I say me like dose: bay dy-
selluf all dem grazy reskells dake away
from you, und I say dank you all oafar
dot pargain insite uff—so!"

Halliboober certainly appeared to be
in thorough earnest, but it was not so
easy to banish such suspicions as he had
inspired, and the Sport from Hard Luck
bluntly declared his skepticism.

"Id vhas drue; all drue, so hellup me
cracious cootness!" vowed Johan, ear-
nestly. "I loose only my leedle schenge.
I hef me dose tiamonds und shewels safe.
I coom py dis vild goodry to py me rich
all oafar in dose goldt und silfer mines.
Und so—I hef got me advance from dot
panker-mans, und so—I bays me you
back; nein?"

But even now Arlington refused to be
convinced, frowning darkly as he struck
down the laden hand, crying out in stern
accents:

"Bah! That's entirely too thin. I be-
lieve you are playing cahoots with that
Punch and Judy outfit."

"So hellup me—"

"And I give you fair warning, Dutchy,
pull out of that evil company while
you've got the chance, for if I can prove
on you what I now firmly believe, I'll
hang your mangy hide on a barb-wire
fence to scare the crows! Go, now, or
I'll expose you to the crowd that's com-
ing with one of your own kidney!"

John Halliboober cast an uneasy glance
across the rocky track, to glimpse the
citizens fetching a corpse that way, then
slunk hurriedly away without further
protest.

Neither was the Hotspur inclined to
take a more prominent part in that pro-
cession, and with face wearing an ex-
pression of gravity unusual for him, he
likewise picked his way back to Hardshell
proper.

It need hardly be said that Dutch Jo-
han held at least a fair proportion of
his thoughts during that walk, but the
more he dwelt upon the recent interview,
the less able Hal was to understand it all.

"Was it a plant? Was it all a cun-
ning trick to snare me worse? But how?
If I had taken the money, what would
that have done me harm or them any
good? And if not—confound the rellow,
anyway!"

Thanks to his recent arrival in town,
Arlington missed the shortest way to his
hotel, and thanks to that mistake he
once more came in sight of the building
which bore the banking sign, and from
the door of which just then came a
shambling figure.

That figure belonged to Moses Grin-
berg, owner of the Hot Stuff, but the
Sport gave him only a glance in passing,
himself entering the bank to be con-
fronted by Earl Chonister with smiling
face and pleasant voice.

"Good-morning, sir. Can I serve you
in any manner?"

"If not against your rules and regula-
tions, yes. Has a man named Halliboober
opened an account with you to-day?"

CHAPTER XIV.

RUNNING UP A SHOE-STRING.

"Why do you wish to know, pray?"

"As a mere business detail," declared the Sport in off-hand manner. "There's a trade in prospective, you understand, and Hallibooper referred me to you as a business reference."

Mr. Chonister looked just a bit irresolute, but that quickly vanished and he made reply:

"Well, sir, to be perfectly frank with you, I know mighty little concerning Mr. Hallibooper."

"But he has made a deposit with your bank?"

"Yes; a package, contents unknown to me, but declared to be of value. Mr. Hallibooper begged me to place it in my safe, and I accommodated him, just as I would any regular patron. But, so far as guaranteeing him in a matter of business—"

"Oh, I'm running my own risk, you understand," deftly interposed the Sport from Hard Luck. "I now that Hallibooper was in the hold-up with me, and that Major Punch went through his clothes just as though he meant business. Now Johan flirts a neat little boodle in my face, and when I ask how came he so, says he procured an advance from you."

"On a diamond; exactly," bowed the banker.

"Thanks, muchly. Do as much for you if ever the chance comes my way," declared the Sport, leaving the bank before any questions could be sent his way by the plainly interested banker.

"Well, the fellow isn't all liar, anyway!" mused the Sport as he moved toward his hotel. "Of course, it is barely possible that he is just what he now lays claim to be, but—I wouldn't swear to that, even yet! He played me dirt back yonder, and—one egg in his basket is fairly proved rotten, and the others begin to smell mighty loud!"

There was considerable excitement in Hardshell over the death of Zack Grebe, but Hotspur Hal kept pretty close to his own chamber, and was not actually called upon to give his side of the story.

Sam Hockett and other witnesses could tell all that was essential, and the fact that the would-be assassin wore a cloth mask was damning enough in itself to insure a verdict of "served him mighty right!"

While thus in semi-seclusion, Hal Arlington did some busy thinking for himself, more than once looking at the few coins which alone represented his present capital.

Past experience told him a man without funds in a mining town was pretty much like the unshod feline of tradition in a far hotter climate than that of Hardshell.

"Of course, I could raise a stake easy enough," he mused. "Dutchy seemed in dead earnest, and then—there's Boulware!"

But to neither of these individuals would the Sport appeal while any other avenue was left open, and there was one resource remaining.

Rising from the side of his bed where he had been sitting, Hotspur Hal closely inspected his garments, judging them from a purely business point of view.

As a matter of course, they had suffered somewhat from his recent rough experience, but having been of first-class material to begin with, were, as a whole, in far better condition than could have been expected.

"They'll pass, and with a little brushing and coaxing they'll do even better," was his muttered decision. "Can't expect a fortune, to be sure, but enough to make a start, and 'twouldn't be the first time I've run a shoe-string up to a bank account, either!"

It was not until the day was fairly spent and supper had followed dinner that Hotspur Hal took positive action upon his reflections, but then he left the hotel and hurried away to a certain es-

tablishment upon which his gaze had that day rested.

In fact, it was here that the sport had purchased his new guns, the sighting of which had terminated so tragically that forenoon.

The place seemed to be run by a sort of mercantile jack-of-all-trades, for he took it as a mere matter of course when Arlington proposed selling his present outfit, taking an ordinary cowboy suit in part exchange.

"It's the money I'm after, you understand," was the frank admission. "Never mind about the quality of the duds you turn over; just so I'm covered according to the law."

While the sport showed himself by no means a petty haggler, he contrived to make a fairly advantageous trade, securing even more cash by way of boot than he had dared hope for.

Then garbed in coarse trousers of duck, flannel shirt, slouch hat, and cowhide boots, in strong contrast with his usual rigging, the Hotspur left the store, strolling leisurely along through Hardshell with its mingled lights and shadows.

There were no street lamps, almost as a matter of course, but as "all-night houses" were plentiful, each one "running wide open," there was almost as much light as darkness, though coming in bands and patches.

Hotspur Hal was not roving without aim, for he had prepared a programme for that evening, as far as anything can be determined in advance.

He passed several places where drinking and gambling was going on, pausing barely long enough to classify the dens, then moving on to better suit his taste.

He lingered a bit longer in front of a saloon and gaming-hall combined, the windows of which bore the letters forming the word "Arcade," as did the big red globe over the portal.

"Looks more like a white man's shebang, and reckon I might as well try it a whirl, anyway," muttered the Sport, then crossing the threshold.

The place was fairly well patronized, and that by what appeared to be the better class, judging from the outward man as visible to those keen blue eyes.

As is duty bound, Hotspur Hal passed directly to the bar, ordered a glass of whiskey, leaning an elbow on polished bar for a leisurely glance around while being served and disposing of the draught.

There was nothing unusual to be seen; a spacious bar, with fittings somewhat better than customarily found in a mining camp; a wooden partition between saloon proper and that section devoted to games of skill and chance, in the centre of which was left an archway, now partially screened by curtains of heavy stuff, moving on a massive curtain pole above.

Having disposed of his drink and paid for it, Hotspur Hal easily crossed over to the gaming hall, letting the curtain fall behind him as he paused for another brief summing up.

There were tables and layouts for both faro and roulette, with several round tables beyond for such as favored short-card amusement.

Neither of these last were as yet occupied, but a fair-sized patronage was given both the other layouts, and Hotspur Hal silently advanced toward that devoted to faro.

Almost perfect silence reigned within the room, for it is only a green hand or a fool who prefers to use tongue when cards and money can talk so much the more understandingly.

Not the slightest notice was paid the Sport as he came forward, and standing back of the seated players, Arlington quietly watched the fall of cards and fluctuations of fortune as the deal progressed.

So far as he could see—and the Sport was pretty near being an adept, too—the deal was on the square, and every

man given a fair chance for his money.

Waiting through another deal to perfectly certain, and to catch the cards, Hotspur Hal then slipped into a chair as it was vacated and slipped into the game as well.

His little fortune was in coin and notes—too small for comfort, as he told himself!—and he did not bemoan about calling for chips.

Unless to a confirmed gambler in of the actual thing, it would hardly interest the reader to be told in minutest detail just how the Sport from Hard Luck set about "running up a shoe-string bank account."

Enough, that, starting in with few modest bets to first test his "luck" to determine what style of game he chose to play, meeting with a few reverses first, but then "hitting a streak of hot vet," the Hotspur began the next with greater assurance, beginning so soon to exhibit one of the traits which had helped to win him notoriety throughout the greater portion of Silverland.

With but occasional loss to offset part his winnings, Arlington pressed luck to the utmost, hampered at start by his limited funds, but that was a fault which was right speedily mended.

Coin and bank bills grew up before him, lessened now and again by having a portion of the pile thrust out of the in his pockets, and ere an hour crept Hotspur Hal was the cynosure of all around.

Cool and nervy, he kept up his winning gait, crowding the limit as far as possible after being politely called down for over-bet by the man at the box.

"You can hit us hard enough with fence up, pardner, judging from present pace," was the grim apology.

"Don't mention it, I beg. Shall I you lighter?"

"Let her went! We'll squeal when we have to; understand?"

"Good enough! This seems to be a night for grunting, though!"

And so it really seemed, for fortune still favored the Sport, and he already had a neat little sum as the result of shoe-string.

So far the Sport felt fairly confident that the dealing had been wholly on square, but knowing from experience how easy it is for a trained dealer to give any particular player the worst of it, he determined to precipitate matters as quickly as possible.

"One moment, please," he said, politely, as the deal grew nigh its end. "Reckon I'll have to go for the last turn, just to make it more binding, so—ten-deuce with queen in hock!"

Without stopping to count his stake, Arlington pushed all he had on the board in front, then waited for the turn.

It came, and—

"Now I've got to squeal!" gruffly ordered the dealer as the cards came out in order as named. "Four to one, and yours, stranger!"

"Say! That's too big a boodle for a one man to take away from here!" cried a clear voice as Hal raked down his winnings.

CHAPTER XV.

SPORT AGAINST SPORT.

Swift as thought itself Hotspur Hal wheeled in the direction of that voice, hand on gun, with muzzle tilting for a snap-shot from the belt in case the should be no time for drawing the weapon.

It certainly sounded as though ugly business was meant, yet matters were not nearly so critical as might have been.

The Sport as by instinct singled out the speaker, but no gun was in sight, and he caught a smile in place of frown.

"Maybe you'd like to help me tote that boodle, stranger?" asked the Man from Hard Luck, half-banteringly, half-melancholically.

"Yes; but not in just the way you fancied, my friend," came the ready response from those smiling lips.

Hotspur Hal was not the only one within earshot who placed a warlike interpretation upon that initial speech, both players and spectators falling to either side with remarkable unanimity, leaving a clear passage between the two men.

This helped the Sport to single out his man, and those keen eyes were but a few seconds in summing up matters.

A well-built fellow who was still on the sunny slope of life, handsome enough as the world goes, yet plainly tagged gambler and all-round sporting man, if only by his peculiar complexion and his fine linen.

He seemed in no wise disconcerted by the result of his opening speech, one hand lightly resting akimbo, its mate deftly twirling a well-cared-for mustache as his dark eyes met those of the successful player.

Hotspur Hal was no whit less cool, and though he made no further motion toward pulling a gun, still he left hand resting upon revolver-butt.

"As how, then?" he queried, crisply.

"One moment, please," shifting eyes to the faro dealer, as he added: "May I ask you for a little recommend, Mr. Johnson?"

"Sure," came the instant reply. "White as they make 'em nowadays, stranger, and whatever he says goes in Hardshell without discount."

"Thanks, Jimmy," with a graceful nod by way of reward, then turning once more to the waiting Sport, to resume:

"And now I'll finish what I started to say, my dear sir.

"I merely meant that 'twould be a pity for a Sport with such a blessed streak of luck not to press it clean to the limit; nothing more, I assure you."

Hotspur Hal accepted that partial explanation with a little nod of understanding, then finished stowing away his recent winnings without taking the trouble to count them.

He knew quite sufficient of Western ethics to feel assured that no attempt would be made to take advantage of that preoccupation. Any such violation of the code would be visited with condign punishment, let the offender be whom he might.

Having completed that pleasant task, the Sport turned again toward the gambler, ready for business such as he instinctively felt was in the air.

Right or wrong, Arlington had caught the impression that this business would pretty apt to be connected with fresh trouble, and as he just then recognized the honest if superlatively homely face and shambling form of Sam Hockett, the man with the Winchester, coming that way, he felt that he could depend upon at least one sturdy friend should that trouble actually arise.

"No offense, I trust, Mr. Arlington?" asked the gambler.

"Not the slightest, I assure you, sir. I fancy you were merely hinting at further business, though?"

"If you care to press your luck, yes. Of course, you sometimes take a hand at poker?"

"I have done so when time was more plenty than I find it just at present. One hardly cares to get interested when he feels that each tick of the watch carries him that much nigher the limit, you understand?"

"Oh, if that is all!" laughingly offset the Hardshell sport, waving hand toward the round tables at the rear of the room.

"And a round of wide-awake fellows we can crowd a mighty heap of genuine amusement inside of right few minutes. Shall we?"

"Single-handed?"

The gambler flashed a quick glance over the gathering, then gave a nod of head as he called out:

"I say, Carl Erickson! This way, please."

"All right, Dedrick," answered a young

man, whose blond head certainly matched well with his Norse patronymic, coming that way. "What's up now, Dana?"

"Short-cards. If we had another—"

"I have him," tersely interrupted Arlington, meeting Sam Hockett and speaking swiftly in lowered tones: "You join us, pardner; just to help hold things on the level."

The old fellow started to protest, but the sport slipped hand through arm and forced him toward the card tables, whither the other twain had slightly preceded them.

"Hello, Hockett, you're going to cut in, are you?" spoke up Dana Dedrick as the table was reached, while the younger member curled smooth lip with a half-sneering smile.

"Like to do it, gents; like it a monstrous heap," declared the old fellow, but shaking his head in doubt. "Ef you critters wasn't sech he-ole, high-rollers! I cain't, jest plum cain't begin fer to do it, boss!"

"Why not?" asked Hotspur.

"Waal, now, you see the idea of it all is pritty much like this: my heart is plum willin', but my pocket cain't stand it; no, sir!"

"Come, come, pardner, if only to oblige me. You've got a pocketful of rocks—I knew it!" declared Arlington as an expression of wonderment flashes into that weather-worn visage.

For Sam Hockett found those words contained a partial truth, to say the least, though he could not explain just how the sport had shifted the cash from one pocket to another without his so much as suspecting the fact until this moment.

Before Hockett could fairly rally from that queer surprise, the quartette were seated at a table, and Hotspur Hal was saying, after a keen glance at the clock upon the wall:

"I have just one hour to spend, gentlemen. At the end of that time I am going to jump the game, win or loose. Is that satisfactory to all?"

"You can't stretch it out a little further, Mr. Arlington?"

"No. That's my limit. Unless all agree that I can quit at that minute, I'll have to draw out before I begin."

Hotspur Hal spoke too positively for there to be any mistake as to his fixed determination, and with that understanding the cards were thrown around for deal, and the game opened in regular form.

Take it as a rule, and a man who proves a success at faro stands less than first-class at poker, and vice versa.

No doubt this had something to do with the persistency displayed by Dana Dedrick when he saw Arlington quit the other table so largely a winner; but it did not take many deals to convince both himself and his youthful chum, Carl Erickson, that a "new chief had come to town," for the Sport from Hard Luck certainly proved himself an adept at draw.

As for the man with the Winchester, he cut but a small figure in the game, playing cautiously and taking no wild chances, evidently deeming it his duty to waste as little of another man's money as might be.

Not so with the others. They played boldly, yet with rare good judgment, backing luck to the limit, yet without crossing to the wrong side of the fence.

And yet, while no fault could be found with the Hardshell sports and their method of play, luck seemed to lean a bit from them in favor of the Hotspur. To put it tersely, the Sport from Hard Luck simply outheld his antagonists.

As a matter of course, attention centered pretty well in that direction, after the heavy winnings made by this new and cool sport, but neither one of the quartette was affected by the onlookers. Each man had his nerve with him, and acted accordingly.

From the very first Arlington saw that Dana Dedrick was to be his particu-

lar antagonist, and so it proved; they were more often the ones left in to do battle for the pot, and, though scarcely a word passed over the table, they made each card talk for itself.

Sam Hockett drew a long breath as Hotspur Hal raked in another very neat little pot on the show-down, then bunched the cards with his brown fingers, chewing vigorously on a section of plug, as he quoth:

"Waal, gents, all, I can't wade in quite so deep es you critters, nur yit measure scads alongside, but thar's one thing I jest kin do."

"And, pray, what is that, my boy?" asked Erickson.

"I kin deal just as often es ary one o' ye; so thar!" declared the man with the Winchester, making the cards fly around at a lively rate.

Arlington looked at the clock before touching his cards, saying:

"Last turn for me, gentlemen; time's mighty nigh up."

"Then we'll make it interesting while she lasts," quoth Dedrick, pushing a couple of bills to the centre. "Twenty to come in."

All four staid, making their entrance good, then discarding for the draw. Arlington took one card, Dedrick a couple, Hockett and Erickson each a pair, which might mean that they held a natural trio, or were pinching a high card to draw to.

After the draw betting began at a lively rate, Dedrick setting the pace and Hotspur Hal easily topping him, face a mere smiling blank as left hand covered his closely bunched cards.

Hockett was first to throw up his hand, but Norway Carl was not long in getting his "polite sufficiency," once again leaving it Sport against Sport.

Bet after bet was made and seen, then raised, and with another glance at the clock, Arlington pushed a pile of bank notes to the middle, saying:

"Five hundred, pardner, since this is the final turn for me."

Dedrick flushed a bit, then left his seat to interview the faro dealer, showing him his cards, then returning to cover the last wager.

"I'll have to see what you're betting on, anyway, my friend."

For answer Hotspur Hal deftly spread his hand, face upward.

Dedrick stared at the four kings, then gave a fierce oath, shoving back his chair and leaping to his feet.

CHAPTER XVI.

DUTCH JOHAN CHIPS AGAIN.

This really looked as though trouble was breaking loose, and Sam Hockett gave a warning cry as he reared back in hot haste, but the Man from Hard Luck kept his seat, merely leaning back far enough to make it an easy matter for him to bring both guns into play with telling celerity should the occasion justify.

Whether this cool action had ought to do with the result can only be surmised, but certain it is that in place of precipitating warfare then and there, the Hardshell Sport forced a dry laugh, then said:

"You carry satan's own luck on your shoulders, pardner, and that's a scandalous fact!"

"You give up the pot, then?" demanded the Hotspur coolly.

"Do I?" with another and more natural laugh, then bending forward far enough to face his own abandoned cards. "Well, I should remark! And I was hugging myself that I had no slouch of a hand, too!"

"Two pairs: both queens, eh?"

"Good enough to bet a farm on, don't you know? And yet—well, if I owned your luck, backed up by your science, my dear fellow, it isn't in a place like Hardshell that I'd go for a record; not any, Maria!"

With all his assumed gaiety, Dana Dedrick was plainly cut to the quick, not so much because he lost a considerable sum

of ready cash in addition to that borrowed from Mr. Johnson, as through loss of prestige as a poker expert.

Hotspur Hal bunched the cards, then put his winnings into a more compact form before rising from his seat.

Now that the first flush of rage had time to pass, he knew there was comparatively little danger of another variety of draw, so far as Dana Dedrick or Carl Erickson were concerned, and, as his sole object in paying a visit to the tiger in his lair was to "run up a shoe-string," just so he made it his prime business to secure that boodle against possible loss.

Not until this was accomplished to his satisfaction did Arlington make reply to or comment upon that half-quip from the rival sport's lips, although he had taken it at its full value.

"Do you really think so, my dear friend?" he easily asked as he rose to his feet and gave those unaccustomed clothes a settling shake.

"Don't you?"

"Well now, possibly I'm 'way off my base, yet it seems to me that I have made tolerably fair wages right here in Hardshell.

Dedrick flushed a bit at this dry retort, in which lay a particularly unpalatable truth, and that feeling was by no means lessened when Sam Hockett fairly exploded with:

"Waal, blame me, ef that hain't jest ee-tarnally so! Ef I'd won hafe es much or ef I'd come out into the hole hafe es deep es you have, Dedrick—darn my cats!"

Carl Erickson slipped a hand through an arm and led his mate aside, whispering softly the while.

Arlington glanced toward the clock, then turned to leaving the gaming hall, when he was checked by the man with the Winchester, who spoke in quiet tones:

"Waal, boss, I've got a right smart pile o' the dingbats left, but when it comes to payin' back t'other rest—"

"Don't mention it, I beg," swiftly interposed the Sport as they slowly moved toward the curtained archway. "I needed you in the game to help hold strangers level, and you've more than earned your money."

"Waal, boss, call that what's gone the percentage, then, but es fer what I'm still got left—"

"Keep it for good luck, or for the loan of your Winchester this forenoon, Hockett."

But this the honest old fellow would by no means agree to, and nothing would serve but paying over the cash then and there.

Arlington hardly fancied this, for he felt that, despite their well-assumed carelessness as to past losses, both Dedrick and Erickson were taking covert notes during this transfer.

As Hockett had dealt the cards which gave out two such heavy-betting hands, this exchange might be productive of hard feelings, if nothing worse than that.

Still, after the service given by the veteran, Hotspur did not care to risk offending him, and with a promise to talk matters over when he had more time to spare, the Sport moved on to the bar.

As always happens where a man has made heavy winnings quite a little crowd bore Arlington company, sending forth fulsome remarks and sounding his praise after a manner scarcely palatable, though all was doubtless well-intentioned.

No one knew better than the Sport from Hard Luck what perils are pretty sure to attend a fortunate player, particularly in a region where law was but little more than a legend; and, too, no man knew better how to fling a sop to Cerberus.

Passing under the archway he paused at the bar, tapping with knuckles to attract attention, then speaking in clear tones:

"I trust you will oblige me, gentlemen, one and all, if only for the good of

the house. Set 'em up, please, Mr Barkeep!"

A more popular speech could hardly have crossed his lips, and the Sport made the most of the genial crush which followed.

Among the rest came Sam Hockett, and slipping a couple of notes into his hand, Arlington whispered, under cover:

"Dope 'em again, pardner, after this. I want to slip out on the sly, and get shut of all this boodle before—understand?"

"You bet yer sweet life, pardner!"

And so it came to pass. Arlington tipped his glass with the best of them, and modestly bowed his thanks for the hail of compliments poured upon both sport and method of play, but then, while the man with the Winchester nobly performed the part allotted him, Hotspur Hal slipped silently away, leaving the crowded bar without being noticed, so far as he could see just then.

He swiftly moved away, turning the first corner to guard against possible following, then taking a more leisurely course toward his hotel, chuckling just a bit as he thought of recent events.

"'Twas running up a shoe-string, sure enough! If I could count on just one week of such a luck-streak—well, don't know but what I'd take a shy at that wonderful Hot Stuff plum my own self!"

So far as he could tell, not a soul save himself had as yet left the Arcade, and that belief lent the Sport a sense of security which swiftly following events by no means served to justify.

He had left the saloon fairly well to the rear and was beginning to look for the hotel, when a number of shadowy-looking figures sprang forth from a mass of gloom, striking as they came.

It was a bare chance that Hotspur Hal caught a glimpse of them at all, and pure instinct that made him dodge a bit, far enough to save his skull from a deadly blow, but not so far as to entirely escape that venomous attack.

Staggered by the stroke, which took effect upon his shoulder, the Sport stumbled and fell as his assailants came in contact, fairly crushing him to earth, while in his ears sounded a savage curse and cry:

"Kill him! Croak the devil before—"

Taken so utterly off guard and by such heavy odds, Arlington still put up a desperate struggle, fighting as only such a man knows how, but he could not have lasted long had they been left to themselves.

Instead, there came a wild rush out of which a dozen lusty arms seemed flying, each ending in a heavy club, and all falling to the grotesque tune of:

"Mein cracious! Mein cracious!"

Over rolled two of the thugs, half-stunned by those vigorous blows, and feeling like one almost in a waking dream that aid was at hand, Hotspur Hal renewed his struggles and partly rose to his feet.

"Hellup, mein cracious!" howled the rescuer, who could be none other than Johan Hallibooper. "I preak me some copfs all in a boondle like—I holler!"

These howls and yells proved even more demoralizing than blows, for even so soon the alarm was spreading, and knowing what precious scant law is meted forth to fellows of their kidney, the thugs gave way, breaking off in headlong flight, almost instantly vanishing amidst the shadows of night.

Hotspur Hal was partly dazed by the ugly blows he had received, yet he was sufficiently clear-witted to know that any fresh notoriety that evening would work him ill rather than good.

Catching Johan by the arm and giving the excited fellow a vigorous shake, which effectively cut short those abominable howls, he cried:

"Come, come, Dutchy! Pick up your legs and scoot like—I wouldn't call any further notice my way to-night for—the devil!"

For Hallibooper, by a dexterous twist

and writhing jerk, tore free his arm A b shot off into the darkness, just as thode so hotly awakened to honest wrath "So he must capture each and every oned, those lawless ruffians. od

Only, sad to relate, Johan selectet w route exactly opposite that taken by ste thugs in flight! "W

"Well, now, that does cork me!" "I d ploded the sport, staring for a braceuple seconds after that flying shadow; d a longer, though. the

Already the alarm had spread t considerable distance, men shouting " calling, trying to more exactly locatevo b disturbance. Maj

With a gesture which expressed atio plexity quite as much as anger or ad p gust, the Sport hurried away from ann spot where he had so narrowly escantil death, once more heading for his hotght

He was not ready to explain his la "W adventure, particularly since his en, t witness had given leg-bail, and felt near his proper place was in his chambe "Je not in his bed itself. r s

Meeting only a couple of citizensheel the way, and easily evading them "T they hunted for the circus, Hotspur im! reached the hotel and at once procee Maj up-stairs to his room, closing and lare, ing the door behind himself before pad a ing to take breath. Then he sat do "T brooding over the event, wondering ou Johan was, and why he had run away c oddly. "W

CHAPTER XVII.

BIRDS OF PREY TOGETHER.

Thanks to the speedy flight of th "N precipitate retreat on the part of J Maj Hallibooper, and wise retirement of " at Sport from Hard Luck, there was ack cious little to satisfy the curiosity poi those who made a rush toward the sed, posed "circus." "G

A vain quest, a number of was ou t questions and surmises, then the li fize The army likewise melted away, each uni nder resume the thread broken by the ala nd

"Jest some critter who's bin hittin the bottle too turrible stiddy," was a hat unteer explanation. "Hevin' a ra op 'long of the man with a poker, an' d The got skeered out by his own yowl hou unc shore!"

But there was a sequel to that l ne t affair which was by no means thou rse of, even by the most romantic am pobe "A those disappointed searchers. imp

Though scattering as they fled fr "J that human catapult with so many a the t and thumping clubs, the trio of th icker quickly came together when they fo n' c no positive pursuit was being made. ll y

More than one of the squad bore p ne c ful mementoes of that odd affair in all n shape of smarting bruises and swell on W lumps, thanks to Hallibooper's de wielded cane.

In a few moments another person ie P joined the trio, coming almost with to r sound, and just as though that or t a thoroughly understood rendezvous ss p the night. ese

"Steady, lads!" he gave sharp wa Wh ing as the thugs separated, each one g ght ping weapon in menacing fashion. "H "T you lost your eyes as well as your e ds; then?"

"It's the boss, boys!"

"The major—is it the major, thoug Th ng "Did the Sport pack your ears as v "V as fill your eyes, Dick?" crisply as eck the latest comer, at the same time m rack ing a little closer to the doubter. "E

"Cuss him—cuss him all over!"

"Amen to that, and right hear take too!" added the chief of road-agents, ts t this was indeed that noted charac "I mask over face and hands in gloves, "S as he might be rigged out if on the rom of another daring hold-up along the st ear trail. ne

"What is it, boss?" asked another "T the thugs. "Ary new job on deck? "T didn't know ef—"

"What have you been doing? W h was all the racket about, anyway?" "a

rm A brief hesitation, then Dick Fitchner thode answer, half-doggedly: "Some sport who'd pulled off a big oned, the boys told me, major. We hadn't od time to fix it up in style, of course, ectet we done jumped him to the queen's by ste an'—"

"Who put up the stall?"

"I did, boss," answered one of the other raceuple. "I see him at the Arcade, an' he w; d a mighty sight more rocks in his thes then the law 'lows, and so—"

"Who had?"

"The Sport; him as painted Dicky's atevo bloomin' peepers, ye know?"

Major Punch gave start and low ejac- ation at this, betraying both surprise and powerful interest, though after what manner was by no means easy to tell, until his coming words threw a little otight upon the subject.

"What? Do you mean—was it Arling- s on, the Sport we roped over on the Cap- lt deaf trail?"

"Jest him, boss. An' ef it hedn't a' bin r some blamed cyclone on twenty ensheels—wasn't it, boys?"

"That double-cussed Dutchy, cuss ur im!" gratingly supplied Fitchner.

Major Punch gave an impatient ges- lare, reaching forth to grasp an arm and dd a vicious shake to his words.

"Talk a string, confound you, man! g you held up the Hotspur; is that the way of it?"

"Waal, we made a sort o' break that ay, anyhow, boss."

"And you downed him? You wiped im out? Say that you sent him over he divide and I'll pay— You did?"

"Not!"

Major Punch caught his breath sharp- of at this significant finale. He drew s ack a bit with a gesture of savage dis- tpointment. But then he as quickly ral- ed, speaking in more even tones:

"Go on. Tell me all about it, please. ou tried to hold the fellow up, yet made fizzle of it; you three chiefs?"

There was a touch of acrid sarcasm nderlying that conclusion, but for good nd sufficient reasons neither one or at trio deemed it the part of wisdom ap openly resent the sneer.

The story was told, briefly, yet fairly ough, considering all things, Major urch listening without comment until he thug broke off to again pour forth urses upon the head of Johan Halli- oober.

"And there was but the one came to mp you?"

"Jest the one critter, boss," admitted he thug, gruffly adding: "But he done icked up racket 'nough fer a thousan'; n' clubs! Durned ef I hain't a-thinkin' ll yit that he done hed a club fer each ne o' them dirty fingers o' his'n, an' the ll bunch of 'em weighin' mighty nigh a n apiece; an' that's no lie, neither!"

Whatever his private opinion may have een, Major Punch evidently deemed it le part of wisdom not to rub his rascals o roughly, and so maintained silence r the space of nearly a minute, doubt- ss pondering over the situation as thus esented.

When he finally broke silence, 'twas ght to the point.

"There's only one thing to be done, ds; the Sport has got to go under! e've just got to down him—for keeps!"

The thugs interchanged glances, shrug- ng shoulders significantly.

"Waal, boss, we done tried that on, I eckon. An' he's a mighty tough nut to rack; now you hear me howl!"

"Bah! I never thought to hear you ake to whining, Vic. And, if the pay ts the job?"

"It's straight business, then, boss?"

"Straight as a string, and business rom the word go!" positively asserted he road-agent leader. "If he hasn't ean caught on to our little racket, he's osing too mighty nigh it for our safety."

"Then you really reckon, boss?"

"That he is playing detective, either a his own hook as a sideflyer, or else a regular. Either way he's too mighty

dangerous to our outfit to be let run any longer. Now—will you fellows down him, once for all?"

"Ef we jest hev to, boss," hesitatingly. "But he's a turrible tough critter to han'le, an' that's no lie!"

So far the thug called Vic by his leader had been permitted to do the talking for all three; but now Dick Fitchner stepped more to the front, taking the word into his own mouth.

"Whar's the sense in makin' so many bones of it, Major? Ef you all will 'gree to stand to my back through the hull business, I'll take the job an' see it's clean jobbed, too!"

"You really mean all that, Dick?"

"Every word, Major. All I ax is fer the gang to back me up ef I git into a box; some o' these yer cits is so mighty finicky!"

Major Punch reached forth a gloved hand to grip that of the thug, shaking it cordially as he made reply:

"Don't you worry about the backing, Dicky, man! We'll see that you have plenty of fair play, and if the citizens get on a high horse—well, we'll just take the town and run it wide open!"

Although this sounded rather far- fetched, not to say bombastic, Dick Fitchner appeared to be well content with the assurance given, and so expressed himself.

"All right, Dick; we'll surely do our part if you do yours. How are you think- ing of turning the trick? And just when?"

"To-morrow, ef I kin ketch him afoot. An'—how about the Dutchy?"

Major Punch gave a low, queer chuckle at this, then made answer:

"Leave him for later on, please, Dicky. I fancy the fellow will be well worth cul- tivating after quite a different fashion. Now, do the job up brown, Fitchner, and we'll attend to the rest."

"Good enough! I'll do my part, or I'll never turn another trick in this life; you kin bet your bottom dollar on that!"

"See that you do. Kill the Sport; make sure of him, above all else!"

With these vicious words by way of parting address, Major Punch turned away and speedily vanished amid the gloom of night.

A brief silence rested upon the trio of toughs, broken at last by Vic, with the query:

"How much o' all that is straight goods, an' how much plain guff, Fitch- ner?"

"Straight as a string an' you know it! What'd I want to lie about?"

"Waal, you got a job let out fer ye, anyhow," was the consoling comment. "When we three couldn't keep him down in a heap, you don't want to contract—"

"That's all right, old man. I've done tuck the contract, an' ef you fellers'll play up jest a weenty bit when the right times comes, I'll do the rest; an' do it up brown as the major wanted. Hear me belch?"

"Talkin's cheap, pardy, but doin's tougher by a heap-sight!"

"That's all right, too, but when a thing hain't jest like, it's plum dif'rent, hain't it? An' so—I say, pards."

"Keep on a-sayin' of it, why don't ye?"

"Back yender; I jest hed time fer to know thar was somethin' comin' our way, jest a-whoopin'. Then I ketched a clip 'longside the cabeza which knocked me a clean rod, tail-on-eend! Now—who done it?"

"Dutchy; don't you know that?"

"The same Dutch we held-up, over yender?"

"Sure! Reckon thar's room for a couple o' sech in Hardshell?"

"All right, then. It shorely ought to be easy 'nough, an' it will, ef you fel- lers'll sort o' lead up to it, eh?"

"Which way, fust?"

"Dutch helped the Sport out, didn't he? Well, turn about's no more'n fa'r play the world over! So—like this, ye see, pards."

CHAPTER XVIII.

TRIPPING THE LIGHT FANTASTIC.

Although Hotspur Hal spent consid- erable time pondering over several points which were by no means as clear as he could like to have them before finally taking to his pillow that night, he was up bright and early the next morning, as befits a man who has a programme ready laid out for the day.

While disposing of a hearty breakfast, Arlington saw sufficient to realize how little it takes to center the public curi- osity, for nods and winks and whispered comments were more than usually abun- dant among those who shared the dining room with him.

Being fairly well accustomed to this rude sort of lionizing, the Sport from Hard Luck gave no sign, yet keeping ears keenly trained for such hints as might float that far.

He caught sufficient to know that the subdued chatter was confined to the part he had played at the Arcade, nothing coming his way to even hint at his be- ing connected in any manner with the brief alarm which had stirred a portion of Hardshell later on.

"Halliboober hasn't been blowing his horn, then," mentally commented the Sport, after leaving the dining room and procuring a cigar at the hotel bar.

Somehow thoughts of the odd genius who had figured so frequently in his own affairs kept hunting Arlington, though the more he pondered the less light he won on that particular subject.

Was Johan anything more than ap- peared upon the surface? Was he mere- ly a shrewd, unscrupulous fellow whose sole idea in life was how to improve his own condition?

His conduct at the time of that hold-up certainly seemed to bear this construc- tion, for past all doubting he had given Arlington "the dump," and so helped the road agents get the better of the Sport.

He himself admitted that this action was taken purely and simply in order to come off with less serious loss himself. Having aided them so materially, the robbers would be far less likely to search him so closely, so thoroughly, and thus his hidden gems might escape confisca- tion.

Or—was that but a cunning fabrication, likewise?

And yet, if false in toto, why should Johan offer to repay the Sport all he lost to Major Punch? Why even insist upon making restitution.

Then, too, the latest event; his bold rescue of the night just past!

Hal Arlington left the hotel and moved leisurely away, head bowed a bit more than usual, for his brain was being racked with all these doubts and surmises and unanswered (if not unanswerable) ques- tions.

Still, though seemingly paying no heed to his footsteps, the Sport did not go astray in his preoccupation, thanks to his having laid out a programme in ad- vance.

He roused up as he came to the shop which he had already patronized on two different occasions, giving a frown and biting short a sound which might easily have become a solid oath.

For there, in full view of whoever cared to turn eyes in that direction, the enterprising storekeeper had placed on exhibition the very garments sold him the evening before by the Sport from Hard Luck!

Entering the shop, Arlington spoke curtly:

"Fetch those duds in here, will you? I want them back."

With such an introduction, it was by no means difficult to close a bargain, especially as the Hotspur was now well supplied with funds.

Paying the price demanded without grumbling at the heavy profit tacked on to the cost price by the dealer, Hotspur Hal saw the garments put up in a neat

bundle, then tucked them under an arm and left the store.

Just as his feet struck the street, however, sounds came on the air to cause his ears to prick and a bit keener glitter to leap into his eyes; sounds which were as trumpet-blast to ears of an old cavalry horse.

"Somebody opening a circus, and that's the honest fact!"

A brace of pistol reports, followed by coarse yells and laughter, all coming from no great distance, although as yet hidden from the Sport's view around a corner.

The clatter of swift-falling feet caused Arlington to wheel in the opposite direction, free hand dropping to butt of revolver, but he faced nothing more dangerous than a couple of excited citizens on their way to see the fun ahead.

"Come on, pardner!" cried one of the twain as they rushed past. "I reckon thar's room fer one more to see the—whoop 'er up thar!"

Hotspur Hal, feeling that he had already mixed up in ample excitement since his arrival at Hardshell, hesitated for a brief space.

"It'd be wiser to go t'other way, I reckon," he muttered, fidgeting uneasily the while as another crack of pistol came to his ears. "But wouldn't those fellows think it queer? If they'd call it afraid—and that does settle it!"

Again a weapon spoke, and once more came the sounds of wild, reckless mirth from beyond that obstructing corner; but it was the dread of a fearless man lest he be thought a too prudent individual which sent the Sport ahead instead of to the rear.

It took but a few of those long strides to carry Hotspur Hal to a place from where he could catch a fair view of what was going on ahead, and only one look to tell him the whole truth.

Somebody was being "shot up," and that somebody was—none other than Johan Halliboober!

"Trip the light fantastic, Dutchy! Pick up your heels and dance as if—lively, now!"

"Ach! Mein shiminy cracious!" fairly howled the German, giving a spasmodic leap and letting escape a shrill howl of terror as another bullet ploughed up the dry dirt almost directly beneath his feet.

"Only shooting up a dance; I thought it might be worse!" muttered the Hotspur, stopping short, yet with brows gathering in an ominous frown as he watched the rude jesting.

For such it showed upon the surface, and Johan Halliboober was by no means the first tenderfoot to be thus put through his paces in Hardshell.

It was all easy enough, barring the principal actor, several rough-and-ready fellows with guns in hand, taking turns at shooting recklessly close to those coarsely shod feet, making the pilgrim from Germany hop and skip with ludicrous agility lest even worse befall his understanding.

"Ach! Mein cracious—mein cootness—mein cracious cootness!" howled Johan, wringing hands and contorting shoulders as he tried in vain to evade his tormentors, every effort only adding to the merriment of the now fairly numerous spectators.

"Whoop 'er up, 'Liza Jane! Paw the dust, Dutchy! Cut a pigeon-wing fit for—prance, ye blame contrairy steer! Prance in double-quick or—go up the flume a-kitin'!"

Leaving out the sense of barbarism, it was a really ludicrous, mirth-provoking spectacle, to which the peculiar garb worn by Halliboober in no small degree contributed.

His long-tailed coat went flip-flopping in the air as its master wildly cavorted, while the brim of his dilapidated hat was now up, giving a fair view of that frightened visage, then came down to serve as a partial eclipse of both face and voice.

"Ach! Mein holy cracious! Ach! I vhas me no tie like a hock uff you vhasn't—I bay me tollar uff I leds me off all py dis vonce! Ach, shendlemans, my tears! I neffer me do some mores uff I vhas—ach! I vhas a tead mans all oaffer!"

For one of those reckless shots came far too close for comfort, the heavy bullet ripping loose a sole and bruising foot, if not worse than that.

Until now the Hotspur had remained a silent witness, although his anger was steadily rising higher; but now he sprung forward, crying out in stern warning:

"Let up on that, you fellows! Fun's all right enough in its way, but you're running this clean into the ground!"

This caused a sensation, as might have been expected, and from the capering Dutchman all eyes turned upon this bold intruder.

"And who the dickens may you be that talks so mighty loud, all of a sudden?" harshly demanded the fellow who had misjudged that shot, turning upon the Sport and partly lifting the still smoking revolver.

If he really meant shooting, he was a fool for letting tongue talk before trigger-finger, especially when he had the Hotspur for an adversary.

That package of clothes shot ahead with all the force an unusually muscular arm could lend it, striking upon that pistol arm, driving it back and to one side, the weapon exploding as it fell from fingers to ground.

The Sport from Hard Luck was barely a second later in coming, and with left hand shooting forth, the thug was bodily upset, head making a visible dent in even that dry and well-packed dirt.

"Steady, all!" cried Hal, voice rising like blast of bugle. "I'm not hunting a fight, but this brutal sport has got to stop. Come, Dutch!"

The little crowd which had been gathered by those sounds of a "shooting up dance" was scattered by that charge, those who really held no malice at heart falling back with a recognition that this was all in the day's work, but not so the schemers in secret.

As this was precisely what they were playing for, each man was prepared to do his part, and, though one of their number had fallen, temporarily knocked out, the others were still on deck.

"Dump the blame fool, mates!" howled Vic Turner, making a bull-like rush toward the sport, yet all the while keeping a keen lookout for Dick Fitchner.

Hotspur Hal sprung to meet that attack, and again his terrible left shot forth with telling effect, sending Vic backward in a stagger, to whirl half around, then give a yell of warning to his mates as he saw Fitchner coming to play his part in the ugly scheme.

Coming with a round ball of metal in his hand, from which smoke and spitting sparks were issuing, and which he hurled full at the Sport, at the same time crying out in savage hatred:

"Down to hades an' tell 'em I sent ye, Sport!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE VICTIM OF THE BOMB.

Straight for the Hotspur flew this spitting devil of destruction, but before it could fairly reach its marked victim, a gaunt figure sprung between with clutching fingers, the figure of Johan Halliboober.

"Look oudt! You make some more voolishness py—ach, mein Cott!"

The spluttering missile was caught in sure grasp, and without holding it even the fraction of a second, Johan flung it swiftly back, at the same time leaping backward with a warning cry and desperately working arms.

He caught the astonished Sport about the middle and flung his whole weight into the effort, the two men falling to the

earth in company even as a thunder report rent the air and shook the buildings around, knocking down a portion of the porch whereon a number of amused spectators were stationed.

A brief pause where only the echoes of the explosion were prominent, a screech of awful agony broke from the cloud of smoke and dust, shivering debris.

That horrid scream seemed to be a spell which had fallen upon the entire congregation, and while a number took themselves to almost aimlesslest other explosions follow, sprung to the rescue, forgetful else save the fact that a human was in sore trouble.

Of the two men who fell in company, Johan Halliboober was first to spring to his feet, the Sport from Hard Luck still lying on the broad of his back, lying like a fish out of water.

"Ach! Shiminy kee-ristmas, Jansmans!" cried Johan, stooping to help hand even as his glittering eyes turned toward yonder smoke-veil. "Ve hef some more droubles punch uff—vhas you gatch ainy leadle shplit-deffels py your teinein?"

Another cry of agony and Hotspur recovered breath sufficient to take a springing dizzily to his feet, his hand fumbling for the revolver, that fall, while its mate mechanically pressed his shoulder-injured store.

"Pack py der house your sy, on!" came a husky warning from Johan Halliboober. "Here! your goon—key!"

Arlington grasped the weapon and backed in company with the lone fellow, and from thence they took notes of what had and was still taking place.

Yonder, where the ground well and cracked by the explosion, the prime mover in this affair, writhing, crying aloud in his agony, his shirt shattered and torn to shreds, his face blackened and marked with altogether one of the most wonderful looking objects imaginable.

"Who is it?" huskily asked the clearing eyes with a forearm as the men stood with their backs guard to solid wall.

"Dot same vheller who vhas dar pumb py you," as hastily answered the Dutchman. "I gatch me dot, unenpack like id vhas ret-hot already's now—vatch me you oudt a leete. Dot vhas all pud-ub schob, u woder vhellers may—eyes ober h now!"

Such was indeed the case; the sufferer was none other than Dick Fitchner. He who had devised this method of effectually disposing of whom both himself and mates in feared to face in the open, even long odds in their favor.

Fitchner fell victim to that devil turned infernal machine, the eye, of which cast his pards into a much confusion and bewildering did their particular enemy.

If Fitchner had not been so sure if he had more thoroughly prepared mates for what he contemplated, results might easily have been different, their main end might have been even though the dynamiter himself so frightfully disabled.

But the thugs were completely paralyzed by the peril which they unexpectedly called upon to share their intended victim, and before they could rally wits sufficiently to do two men were once more on their feet, out, and ready for business.

That heavy explosion roused a shell, and among the earliest that way were Dana Dedrick and Erickson, splitting the excited crowd until they could catch sight of the ferer, then taking the lead as a pronounced spirit will.

"Fall back, you idiots!" cried

hurling more than one of the citizens away by use of his powerful arms. "Give him air and—where's the r? Get a hustle on, you lunk-head! Can't you see that the poor devil is he, anyway?"

Then voices called out the name of Dick Fitchner.

Though so horribly mutilated, Dick Fitchner was not losing so much blood, from his more superficial injuries.

His hand and arm were gone to the elbow, while all between them and shoulder was a mass of ugly pulp, burned and charred; but that very fact lent the longer lease of life.

Less frightful injury, he would surely have perished from loss of blood promptly as the doctor worked, had he come upon the scene.

Back and out of the way, all you that can't or won't work!" harshly commanded Dana Dedrick, taking up as though by right. "The villain can't lie out here in the open. Room and bed ready for him. And—well—"

"Well, pardy!" instantly answered Dick Fitchner.

"To that part of it, will you? My answer for lack of a better."

"And you fellows, some blanket to make a stretcher of!"

So it was arranged.

The wounded dynamiter was more awkwardly handled now than at first, for his injuries were benumbing his senses, and he could only give low faint curses, and inarticulate mutterings.

Doing what was strictly necessary, before attempting the removal, Dr. Fitchner and Dana Dedrick managed matters till the best of their ability, the sport keeping the excited crowd well under control during that procession.

Triumphantly for the injured man, the preparation was at no great distance from the scene of the explosion, and he was conveyed thither without further misfortune.

The crowd was shut out, as a matter of course, and as such an assembly can be upon doing, set up a wild howl as what it would have troubled the square of their number to say, off-

As Hardshell sport came out with a swarthy face, hand going up to communicate ere he spoke:

"Read's eating you all, anyway? Are you leete men, or merely a pack of wolves on a bender?"

"Obey he? How's Dick Fitchner?"

"The better for your sort of Paulette. If you're so mighty Dicko work off steam, why not turn this twill do some good? And—who's the poor devil up like that, any-"

"Ev' Cott in himmel!" huskily mumbled Hardshell at this. "Pedder I coes at devrom does beoples—yaw!"

"He ey, Dutch!" warned the Hotspur, taking an arm tightly and restraining himself from inactive recoil. "If you run now all the worse for both of us; so see?"

It was one thing both men could surely eyes were turning their heads how readily ugly words were belied on lips in answer to the query of Dana Dedrick.

"One it! Dutchy done it all!" sternly commanded the Hotspur, evidently asking nothing more than to get at the exact truth of the matter. "If Fitchner flung the bomb comes it he alone suffered"

"cr,"

"Dutch done it! Dutchy slammed pore Dick with the durn—"

"Dutchy merely tossed back what was flung at him—or at me, I tell you, one and all," swiftly cut in the Hotspur. "You fellows were making a monkey of Hallibooper, and when you carried the joke a little too far, I chipped in and—"

"What interest had you in the affair, pray, Mr. Arlington?"

"That of a white man who saw a pack of toughs imposing on a pilgrim who wasn't near able to take his own part, Mr. Dedrick," came the prompt response. "If you can make capital crime out of that—"

"Go a little easy, good friends," at this juncture spoke up Leonard Boulware, pressing more to the front to add: "I saw the whole affair, and neither of these men was at all to blame."

"You saw it, Mr. Boulware?"

"Yes. And I'm ready to go into court and make Bible oath that Dick Fitchner got no more—if so much—than he intended for these two men. I saw him fling the bomb, and I saw it caught, to be tossed back before the explosion."

Leonard Boulware took off his hat to thrust tips of fingers through a ragged tear in the crown, adding tersely:

"I was nigh enough to catch this, Dedrick, so I reckon I could see the rest without putting on glasses!"

The Hardshell sport hesitated, seemingly in doubt what to say or to do next, when Leonard Boulware added another sentence:

"I'll go bail for both of these men, if there's to be any after-clap, you understand, gentlemen?"

Perhaps it was fortunate that a man of such powerful influence was at hand to back them up, but ere either Hallibooper or Hotspur Hal could offer thanks a fresh alarm broke forth from no distant quarter.

Shot after shot split the air in swift succession.

CHAPTER XX.

ANOTHER CITIZEN OUT OF LUCK.

In the self-same instant every face in all that crowd was turned in the same direction; that whence sounded the swift fusillade.

Eyes were of no service just then, for the firing came from a fairly distant portion of Hardshell, houses between shutting off all view.

Six shots coming so rapidly that they blended into one long roll as of deft sticks against head of drum, but ere the last one came Dana Dedrick gave a sharp cry, flinging up a hand as he made a forward leap, then shouting forth the thrilling words:

"A raid! The bank's being raided, boys! Come—to the bank!"

Instantly all was confusion, all a wild pell-mell, where man jostled man and hindered progress even while making the most strenuous efforts to hasten in the direction of the supposedly endangered bank.

"Steady, Dutch!" warned Hotspur Hal, shoving Johan closer to the wall the more surely to keep outside of that crazy rush and crush. "All eyes open! Maybe it's all right, and maybe it's all a stall to do what they're afraid to try on in the full open!"

But that keen suspicion was apparently out of place, for the two men, and Leonard Boulware into the bargain, had been utterly forgotten for the time being. The crowd had thoughts and cares only for what might be going on beyond; there where stood the Bank of Hardshell.

It took barely a score of seconds for Dana Dedrick to win his way to the nearest corner, from thence catching sight of the man whose barking guns had worked all this excitement; a man who was just then wildly gesticulating and shouting at the top of his voice:

"Fire! Fire! The bank's on fire!"

Direct alarm that can be given in a "wooden town" such as all new mining

centres are, where water is never any too plentiful, and apparatus for fighting the flames is practically nil.

"Fire!" repeated Dedrick in stentorian tones. "The bank is on fire! Play you was each a fire engine, and buckle down to it like—"

His words were lost amid that loud outburst, but not one among all that crowd could out-foot the gambler, and his was the broad shoulder which dashed first against the closed and locked doors of the bank.

The whole front of the building shook, but the barrier did not give way at once, and catching sight of the yellow flames within, Dedrick bent arm and thrust his elbow through the thick glass in the double panels.

With this as a starter, it did not take long to clear a space sufficiently large for the athletic fellow to slip through, then clearing counter and railing with cat-like activity, to pounce upon the flaming mass of papers and waste, at the same time crying out hoarsely:

"Break in, men! Here's Chonister, and—murder's been done, or I'm a liar!"

With such an incentive for swift work, it did not take long to break lock and shove bolts away with their catches, Dedrick all the while fighting those flames which threatened to make a bad matter worse.

The bank was fairly thick with smoke by the time aid came to him, but Dedrick, coughing and choking, stooped to fasten grips upon that body, dragging it away from the spot where first discovered.

Another hoarse cry escaped his lips as he fairly felt the man, for no corpse could shake and writhe after that fashion.

"Not dead! Chonister is alive, and—"

Coughing cut short that glad cry, but the sense of it was caught by the majority of those present, and with cheery shouts the citizens worked with redoubled energy, soon extinguishing the last of that burning waste.

By this time, too, aid came to the banker and his chief rescuer, angry cries going up as it was seen that Earl Chonister had been both bound and gagged before being left to his fate.

Little time was wasted in setting the banker at liberty, but he seemed almost completely exhausted by all he had undergone, working his throat and parched lips with no better results than an uncertain groan.

"Get some water, some of you!" harshly commanded Dedrick, now as before taking a prominent lead. "He's all choked up! Wonder he isn't—Who's got a nip of the real stuff in his clothes?"

Several flasks were promptly produced, but Dedrick took only that which first came his way, uncorking the bottle and holding it to the lips of his new patient as head was lifted to his knee for support.

"Oil your music box, pardner!" was his curt advice. "We're mighty nigh spoiling for a weenty tune of it, don't ye know?"

"I never—where is—those devils?" huskily gasped the banker, making futile effort to arise, but failing through weakness of body or dizziness of brain.

"Who done you up like this, Chonister?" asked Dedrick, curiosity as strongly impressed upon his handsome face as it surely was upon that of all others nigh.

"Who set the fire, pardner?" eagerly cut in another citizen, coming to the front with a can of water.

Dana Dedrick made liberal use of this element, sopping his own kerchief in the water and then wetting the banker's face and head.

The remedy seemed exactly what was needed, and for the first time since his rescue, Earl Chonister breathed freely and clearly, looked sensible as a man will when wits are clearing and coming back at one and the same time.

"I did. I set the fire!" was the first

distinct sentence, and that one which created quite a little sensation among those who caught his words with full understanding.

"Come off, pardner!" cried Dedrick frowningly. "You set the fire by which you would have toasted like a—brace up, man!"

"I did. I had to—just had to!" asserted Chonister, with an evident effort rising to a sitting posture, one hand supporting his weight while its mate clasped his throbbing temples.

The eager crowd would have pressed him unduly, but Dana Dedrick was running matters, and he kept off the press until the banker was better fitted to explain all.

That came little by little, and hardly in sequence as events must have happened, however.

He declared he had been assailed and left bound and gagged, lying thus helpless for more hours than he cared to count or recall.

"Twas early last night, fairly early, I mean. I was working here. I wanted my books in order to show—and somebody jumped me from out the gloom—yonder!" with an unsteady gesture toward the rear of the apartment.

"Water! My throat is—all burnt up!"

Again Dedrick supplied those wants, and once more eager demands were made upon Earl Chonister for a more detailed account of this ugly affair.

"And if he isn't lying from start to finish, I'll eat my hat!" surlily muttered Leonard Boulware to Hotspur Hal, as they kept a little to the rear of the main press.

"Maybe not; the fire isn't as though—"

"He says he set that, and I know—"

"Then he didn't, or else your first guess goes wrong," bluntly commented the Sport from Hard Luck.

Meanwhile Johan Hallibooper was fidgeting nervously near his two backers for the hour, mumbling in his native tongue or else spluttering in broken English, all barely above his breath.

After the temper displayed by this turbulent crowd, the German felt wary about inviting particular notice his way, but now he could contain himself no longer, pushing agitatedly to the front, wringing hands in piteous distress as he confronted the smoke-soiled banker.

"Ach! Mein backage? You heff me dot backage safe, mein tear sir?"

"I don't—oh, it's you, is it?" hoarsely spoke the banker, with sudden frown as of irritation.

"Yaw! Id vhas me, mein own selluf, Johan Hallibooper vrom Yarmany! Und I vandts me to bay off a bile uff moneys, und so—I coom ask me vor dose backage I leaf me py you, coot shendlemans—yaw!"

Earl Chonister rose to his feet, staggering a bit but catching with left hand at counter while waving its mate toward the rear of the room.

"Look for yourself, Mr. Hallibooper. There's the safe, but—all appears gone, and—well, you're in big luck if you're to come off winner where all the rest is loser!"

It seemed a cruelly curt speech to make, but much must be excused by the circumstances.

Johan gave a little gasp, then staggered uncertainly toward the safe, which had until now passed without notice by those present.

All eyes turned that way now, however, and fresh excitement came on top as all could see the safe was wide open, with papers strewn in front as though the contents had been overhauled by ruthless hands!

Dutch Johan peered within, and when he failed to recognize his precious package of gems, pressed closer to add touch to sight, but all in vain.

The package was not there, and as the miserable truth flashed upon his brain with full force, the poor fellow staggered back, pale as a ghost, hands rising overhead to clasp fingers in fierce grief,

voice rising in a quavering scream to shape the words:

"Ach! Mein Cott in himmel! I vhas me ruinet—I vhas ruinet me all oafar! I hef me noddinks lefd now vor keeb me dot sdarfing away vrom! Ach! I vhas co me grazy! I vhas grazy like a pedpoog!"

Stung to the quick by the sight of this poor fellow's wild despair, Hotspur Hal for the first time took open action in the matter, pressing to the front and grasping Earl Chonister by an arm to force his attention while he spoke sternly:

"Who has done all this, sir? Who robbed the bank and that poor man?"

Chonister stared into that face for a moment, then curtly answered:

"Satan and one of his imps, or else—Punch and Judy, curse them!"

CHAPTER XXI.

NAKED TRUTH OR CUNNING LIE?

Whether or no it was so intended, this assertion produced another sensation, little cries and ejaculations coming from those who heard.

Upon at least one of that number the effect was decidedly different, for a harsh, mocking laugh made itself heard, and a hot flush shot into the banker's face as his gaze turned in that direction, to behold Leonard Boulware, father of the woman whom he wished to marry.

Laughing in undisguised scorn, heedless of the half-startled, half-angry glances turning his way at such untimely mirth.

Irritating as this surely must have been, that laughter seemed to serve as a tonic, enabling Earl Chonister to brace up and appear more like his every-day self.

"I say it all over, gentlemen," he added, firmly. "It was Major Punch and Capt. Judy who turned this nasty trick; curse them from crown to sole."

"How did it all happen, then?" asked Hotspur, plainly voicing the desires of those present as well as his own curiosity. "Surely you weren't—how came ye so, anyway, Mr. Chonister?"

"Sit down and take it easy as ye know how, pardner," cut in Dana Dedrick, bringing forward the office chair and with other hand tapping a shoulder. "Of course, we're all on fire to know the tale, old man, but we're not crowding you past the limit: no!"

Chonister smiled his thanks after a faint fashion, but merely rested hand on chair back as though still feeling the need of some such support.

Arlington fell back a bit, willing enough to look and hearken while another took the lead just then. And it was to him that Leonard Boulware spoke in surly mutter:

"Bah! It's all a put-up job, and I just know it! He's playing dirt all over Hardshell, and—"

"Wait. Hear him out first," warningly interrupted the Sport from Hard Luck.

It really seemed a difficult tale to tell, although the banker made a fair effort that way. In fact, his wits still seemed a bit confused.

One thing Dana Dedrick plainly brought to the front; there was little or no need of especial haste so far as hunting the robbers was concerned; many long hours had elapsed since they turned the trick, and past reasonable doubt of their flight had been perfected long since.

"All right. We'll catch 'em up before the thing's all over, just the same. And now—tell us how came ye so, pardner?"

Thus encouraged, Earl Chonister went on to give his explanation of the affair; necessarily imperfect and incomplete, yet plainly the best he could do.

"You know I stay here quite as often as I do at the hotel, gentlemen," was his beginning, pointing by a nod toward the small apartment partitioned off from the bank proper, at the rear. "I meant to sleep in yonder last night. Instead—"

"They surprised you while asleep, then?" suggested the gambler.

"No. I hadn't gone to bed yet. I had

some work to do, you understand, writing that ought to be finished, and—the first I knew was like that, a noise enough to make me turn and a bare glimpse of two or three people, who—"

"The Punch and Judy outfit, Mr. Chonister?"

"I thought so—I still believe—that!" with emphatic nod of head, he hadn't time to do much; hardly time to give a yelp and jump to my feet, I couldn't even snatch my gun from shelf yonder!"

"They downed you so sudden, then?"

"Just that! Jumped all over me, gave me a clip with a pistol butt or you can feel for yourself, Dedrick."

The banker bowed his head, a gambler gingerly fingered that scarfing a brief exclamation as he bloodstained hand where all could as he himself spoke next:

"You did catch it, man dear! Hump a lump like a bump on a log, men!"

"Twas heavy enough to lay me down the time, too, but didn't come so sudden that I couldn't see. I saw the rascals wore black masks, and I believe—I honestly believe that there was a woman!"

"Captain Judy, then!" declared Dedrick, with a full breath. "Woman I'd like to—"

"Oh, come off, old man!" impatiently cried out Carl Erickson. "Can't you Chonister tell us how the trick turned, without so infernally muddling in on the outside?"

"Well, there isn't so mighty much more to tell; about the robbery, I declared the banker, tongue running freely enough now. "That clip laid me for the time, and when I began to get to, I was blindfolded, gagged, and just as you found me, Dedrick."

"But—your eyes were open, Chonister!"

"Yes, because I'd rubbed the cloth but that was later on. I woke up to hear the scoundrels finish the heard 'em laughing over the good they'd made, and then they rack me leaving me to get loose the best I could."

Then, with many breaks, caused by questions from the more impatient, greater part by his own weakness of throat, the robbed banker went on to give in detail his desperate struggle to free himself sufficiently far to get alarm, which might, even then, in redeeming that loss through the capture of the thieves with their valuable plunder.

After fighting in vain for hours his bonds, in the meantime freeing through desperate rubbing of against floor, and turned nearly fra the coming of daylight Chonister he finally succeeded in kicking a matches from where it habitually then oversetting waste basket, exploding some of the scattered with his pounding heels.

"I reckoned the smoke or flames attract attention," he explained, trying to dampen parched lips with dry tongue tip. "Of course, I know a big risk to run, but then I was high crazy! And so—I took my chance—and then—you fellows came!"

As though his bodily powers had measured to meet his tale, the banker gave way now, sinking limply in the office chair, gasping like one on the verge of suffocation.

This sudden collapse caused an excited flutter, but again Dana Dedrick, aided by several of the more level-headed citizens, forced the crowd to keep back, that the suffering man might have a chance of the air he apparently stood in dire need of.

With fresh water, braced by a dash of whisky, Earl Chonister quickly showed signs of rallying, and then, in a little, his tale was completed.

But, so far as his own knowledge

and was nothing to fasten the outrage
ed, any particular person.

that had caught a fleeting glimpse of
and masks, of that Chonister felt
the party wore skirts, although in
it, he might possibly be mistaken.
may have been a long coat, like—
believes—

he sentence was left incomplete, but
ly moving eyes gave hint to at least
et, those listening.

a fra Dedrick looked toward the faint-
paning Dutchman, taking swift
n, that unusually long coat, then
er ng an arm with light fingers as he
t or to the banker in lowered tones:

rick Dutchy, is it, pardner? Take a
a at him and see what you think
that?"

Chonister looked in that direction, but
hook head, almost despondently,
ing a moment later:

! Don't know. I can't be sure. I'm
og, broken up!"

though he was stired from stupor
se, to his ears, inaudible comments,
so Hallibooper roused up, unsteady
I sa pushing back his disordered locks
an sping temples as if hoping to thus
at ce painful throbbings there.

little eyes held a wild light, and
ho saw him just then could for
n instant doubt that a heavy blow
fallen.

gaze roved about that disordered
then settled upon the open safe
ore. That seemed to revive mem-
his recent loss, and staggering that
e dropped to his knees in its front,
groping therein while his quaver-
tates rose high above the other
in the bank.

! Mein Cott—mein Cott in him-
vhas ropped—I vhas lose mein
ts all oafar! Gif me pack mein
Gif me pack mein shewels! Ach!
me boor oldt mans, und I haf me
gs left dot sdarvation to vight
nein! Ach! My tiamondts—mein
s tiamondts!"

boober flung aloft his arms, shak-
y hands in air with frantic vigor,
iving a heart-breaking groan and
combined as he fell forward, head
oulders lying fairly within the
fe.

s and actions more than the words
tirred those witnesses to their
and for a brief space silence
strug. Then one or two of the more
to garted went to the old man's as-
hen, fearing he might have really
bed to the trying shock of his
loss.

s partly vented their feelings in
curses against the authors of all
ouble, and almost without excep-
ose imprecatory threats were di-
against the Punch and Judy outfit.
s not until after this little scene
na Dedrick put in shape the ques-
hich had long since occurred to
rt from Hard Luck: how had the
s contrived to open that massive

Chonister gave a start as this
ame to his ears, and he first
toward the safe before making
et his account was reasonable
as even Arlington felt forced to

safe? Oh! 'Twas already open
ey jumped me. I was working on
ks. I keep them in the safe, you
and? And so— Oh, 'twas all of a
Curse the infernal luck, any-

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n, lit, Hotspur Hal

d. well in touch with the speculat-

wledg

or, and seeing for himself that Johan
Hallibooper was still in the land of the
living, although plainly stunned by the
loss of his precious diamonds, he like-
wise abandoned that scene.

After all, the story of the robbery had
been told, and there was little to be
gained by lingering upon the spot.

As nearly all others clung to the place
with as yet unsatisfied curiosity, it was
by no means a difficult task for these two
men to get beyond ear range of all others,
and it was not until then that the specu-
lator turned upon the sport to bluntly
ask:

"Well, what do you think of it, any-
way, Arlington?"

The Hotspur shook his head slowly,
like a man who was not quite prepared
to give a definite decision.

"That's easier asked than answered,
I'm thinking, Mr. Boulware.

"Of course, and yet, it looks pretty
clear, too!"

"Really?"

"Yes. And you're not a man to boggle
at giving a fair answer to honest ques-
tion, either. So—what do you think of
it all?"

The sport smiled a bit at this persist-
ence, so characteristic of the speculator
as he had thus far found him. And then
he said:

"Since you seem to make a point of it,
Mr. Boulware, I'll say this much: I
honestly believe there's a good deal more
in this affair than has as yet come to
the surface."

Something like an oracle, but there
seemed sufficient in the reply to please
the speculator for all that vagueness.

"You're mighty right, sir!" with
clenched fist forcibly smiting open palm.
"He's an infernal scoundrel, sir; an in-
fernal scoundrel, who would cheat his
own grandmother out of her false teeth
if she gave him even the ghost of a
chance!"

Whether it was well founded or not,
Hotspur Hal had taken to doubting the
handsome banker of Hardshell, and what
he had seen and heard inside yonder rifled
building hardly lessened that doubt, but
this was a touch of prejudice beyond his.

"Well, sir, I really wouldn't go quite
that far just yet. I'm free to own that
circumstances look rather against the
gentleman, but—"

"Gentleman? He's a scoundrel—an in-
fernal cheat and villain!" forcibly de-
clared Mr. Boulware.

"You may be right, looking at matters
from your point of view, Mr. Boulware,"
placably yielded the Hotspur to that ex-
tent. "I can't see it all in quite so
dark a light as yourself, but—"

"You haven't known the fellow as long.
You haven't seen him tried out as I have,
or you'd be first to give him a kick down
the hill!"

"Let it go at that, then. Anyway, as I
tried to say: I do reckon Mr. Chonister
is well worth keeping an eye on, at least
until we've brought this Punch and Judy
outfit fairly to book."

"The same thing; it's all the same
thing, sir!" forcibly declared the earnest
speculator.

"You may be in the right of it all,
sir. I'm not saying, just yet. But I hon-
estly think it'll do no harm to hold tab
on this banker of yours, at least until—"

"When?"

"Until the knaves who held us up and
got away with your good cash have been
brought to the gallows, of course!"

"Well, Arlington, you mark my words:
if ever the Punch and Judy outfit pulls
hemp, Earl Choister will head the pro-
cession from court to gallows tree!"

"All right. If so, so mote it be!" ac-
quiesced the Hotspur, though he was by
no means ready to rest full dependence
upon that rather too hot prejudice. "But
there is one thing dead certain, Mr. Boul-
ware."

"What is it, Arlington?"

"That a member of the outfit was
mighty neatly crippled up when that in-
fernal machine exploded!"

"Fitchner, you mean?"

"Yes. I've looked at it from every
possible point, and I can't make it come
out otherwise. He was one of the rascals
who played guard over Dutchy and my-
self while the rest of the outfit were
roping you in."

"And you really reckon it's all because
of your foolishing them as you did later
on that Fitchner has been so hot against
you?"

"What other reason, pray?"

"Didn't you give him a thumping,
though?"

"Not until after he'd deliberately
picked a row, and that was the first I
ever saw his bare face, too! So I stick
to it, he belonged to the gang, and he
knows just who the head rascals are, be
sure!"

"If really one of them, he'd ought to
know all that," slowly spoke the specu-
lator. "But—would he tell?"

"Certainly not without being asked?"

"And if asked? But, you forget, the
fellow may be dead by this time, if he
was half as badly injured as he looked
to be."

"That's the ugliest part of it all," ad-
mitted the sport, frowning, yet moving
off in company with Mr. Boulware. "If
he'd only been badly scared and less se-
riously hurt I'd like it enough sight bet-
ter."

"Yet he clearly meant to blow you up,
Arlington."

"To scatter me to the four winds, even
as he vowed to do just after I whipped
him," grimly commented the Hotspur.
"I didn't pay much attention to his
words, then, but they came back to me
mighty sharp when I saw that spitting
devil come whizzing my way!"

"It was a marvelous escape. I could
scarcely believe my own eyes!"

"Dutchy was right on deck, and that's
a fact. I owe him one for that, and some
day may happen to pay it back."

"You were risking your life on his
account, even then, remember."

"That don't count. Of course, I
couldn't stand idly by and see such a joke
run clean into the ground," modestly
said the Hotspur, then deftly changing
the subject back again.

"But about Dick Fitchner; pity if he
should hop the twig without letting a bit
of the truth leak out, don't you reckon?"

"You mean more than you are saying,
Arlington; what is it?" almost sternly
demanded the speculator, stopping short
to lay hand on arm and catch eyes with
his own.

"I mean just this, then: That Dick
Fitchner can tell just who held you up
and put it out of your power to pay for
the Hot Stuff. I'd go to him myself only
that would be worse than useless. I've
played too prominent a part in the matter
as it is, and he'd only curse my head off,
or else shut up tighter than a clam."

"Then you mean—you think I could do
any good by going there?"

"You certainly can't if you don't try,
pardner. And now—excuse me, will you?
Got an important engagement which can't
wait. See you another time—so-long!"

The Hotspur turned and strode swiftly
away in the direction of the bank build-
ing, leaving Mr. Boulware standing like
one half mad, half bewildered by that
unceremonious leave taking.

But then the light flashed upon him,
and with a slight hesitation Leonard
Boulware turned to the right about, mut-
tering to himself:

"He's nobody's fool for a fact! And—
I'll try it on, anyway!"

The speculator lost no further time, but
hastened as directly as possible to the
place where the crippled thug had been
conveyed.

There was a room on the second floor,
and not a little to his disgust, Mr. Boul-
ware found a man on guard before that
closed door, and who held up a warn-
ing hand at that approach, speaking in a
half whisper:

"Careful! Not too much noise, please,
sir."

"Hello! You, is it, Erickson?"

"On guard duty, yes," replied the Norwegian. "Ugly affair, too!"

"Ugly, indeed, though, to tell the plain truth, Fitchner brought it all upon himself. He was the one to toss the bomb, you understand?"

"So you said out yonder. I know nothing at all about it. Nor, to tell the honest truth, do I wish to be any the wiser."

Leonard Boulware looked at the closed door, and just then there came a half-smothered groan and cry commingled from the chamber within.

"He's alive, then? It didn't kill him, Erickson?"

"I'd mighty sight rather be dead than in his fix, though," almost gruffly declared the Norseman. "A cripple for life if he pulls through! But he'll never do that, never! He's got his last sickness, and I know it without being told!"

"We'll hope to the contrary, though," assured the speculator, then leading up to the point he was so desirous of making. "I think I could be of service to the poor fellow, Erickson. If you'll just stand aside for a moment, and let me—"

"Not any, thank you!" said the Norwegian, hand coming forward to resist that attempted advance.

"What do you mean by that, sir?" flashed Boulware, hotly.

"Not too loud, please! Mean? Just what it says: no admittance."

"But, I tell you, sir—"

"And I say—speak lower, or else take a walk," sternly cut in Carl, with a nod of head toward the chamber. "The doctor said quiet must be maintained, and that no one should be admitted without his say-so."

"He will not refuse me if—"

"But I do refuse you, sir. Stand back, please. And, if it's all the same to you, Mr. Boulware—go take a little walk!"

"I want to see Fitchner. I must see him. He knows who got my money the other day, and I want him to tell me—"

"That's enough, sir, and mighty nigh too much. Wait and tell Dick all that to his face when he rallies, if he ever does. Go, I tell you!"

And Leonard Boulware turned away, defeated for the time being.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SURPRISE FOR LEONARD BOULWARE.

There was a half smile playing around the lips of the Hotspur as he turned away from Leonard Boulware toward the rifled bank.

"Took the bait like a hungry chub, and before he fairly feels the hook he'll be too well started in the right direction to call a quit!" mentally prophesied the sport, his acute sense of hearing telling him that the speculator had started in an opposite direction.

"Question is, How'll he make it pan out? If I could leave a bit of butter on that tongue of his, I'd call the chances a little more even. As it is—well, he can't very well make a bad matter worse!"

From all of which it may be inferred that, diplomatically speaking, Henry Arlington had not formed the highest possible opinion of the gentleman into whose ear he had just dropped a busy flea!

In spite of his recent assertion, Hotspur Hal had no particular business on hand just then, and had merely turned back toward the rifled bank building because that lay in the direction opposite to the place where Dick Fitchner had found shelter for the time being.

As he came into fair view of the open ground immediately in front of the Hardshell Bank, Arlington found that the crowd was beginning to emerge and to scatter, doubtless having for the time being exhausted the fund of excitement in that quarter.

He saw nothing of Johan Hallibooper, nor was Earl Chonister to be distinguished among the crowd, but he did take notice of Sam Hockett, taller than his neighbors, as a rule, and noticeable if

only because of his rude garb and the never-failing Winchester repeater.

Arlington was seen at the same time, and clearing the crowd, which scarcely seemed to his liking just then, the veteran strode rapidly his way, giving nod and grunt of recognition as he came up to the sport.

"A he-ole kick-uppery, hain't she, now, pardner? Never reckoned I'd see the day which I'd be glad in a chunk I wasn't a rich man. No, sir!"

"A serious affair, I'm afraid," admitted the Hotspur, the two men moving on, to turn aside from that street into another less populous at that moment.

This was apparently more to suit Sam Hockett than his companion, since he took the initiative.

"You bet your sweet life! Who ye reckon done it, aryhaw, pardner?"

"You heard what Mr. Chonister said, didn't you?"

"Yes, but it 'peared to me sort o' like—ef he wasn't jest a-knowin' of all which he did say!"

Hotspur Hal cast a keen glance into that face from the corner of his eyes as they walked on. A puzzled expression rested there, but—was it anything more?

Was this still another shrewd man who seriously doubted the truth and integrity of the Hardshell banker?

"Surely you can't suspect Mr. Chonister of holding back anything of importance, Hockett? Anything, I mean, by which the actual robbers could be brought to book?"

"Oh, them? Waal, now, don't you know, pardner? I sort o' reckon the young feller was in the plum right of it, after all."

"Then it was Punch and Judy?"

"Them, or some o' the same pesky outfit; I do so! An' fer why? They hain't none on 'em a mite too good fer the doin' of it, be they? An' they bin doin' of heap wuss, too, I take it, hey?"

Hotspur Hal gave a slight gesture, with half laugh to match.

"I'm not anyways stuck on the party, pardner. In fact, I'd give a nice little chunk out of the pile I won last night just to catch a fair clew to Major Punch. I'd agree to do all the rest!"

There was a brief silence, during which Arlington took note of the fact that they were drawing near the Boulware home.

"I know it," said Hockett, when the sport mentioned this. "I wanted to come this way, ef— I say, pardner?"

"Well?"

"The idee of it is pritty much like this: Thar's somethin' I knows which mought be pritty tol'able well wu'th the hearin', ye see?"

"Something relating to the road-agents?" demanded Arlington, struck by that peculiar manner and tone.

"Waal, it's pritty nigh much that-a-way, fer a fact!" admitted the veteran, giving uneasy twist of shoulders. "But, not sayin' ary much ag'inst you, ye understand, I ruther do the fust tellin' of it to—an' blamed ef thar he don't come right now!"

Hotspur Hal followed with eyes that eager nod, and recognized Leonard Boulware, with face turned in their direction, walking rapidly, yet hardly with the demeanor of one whose recent efforts have been crowned with perfect success.

The speculator did not moderate his pace as he saw those two men, apparently waiting for his coming, giving crisp nod toward the elder, then addressing Hotspur Hal without much ceremony:

"Tried it on, don't you know, and didn't catch a clam! Wouldn't let me even have a squint at the fellow, much less talk—"

"Better luck next time, sir," interposed the Hotspur, with a gesture, which Boulware was still cool enough to interpret right. "For just now, Mr. Hockett says he has important matter to communicate—"

"I jest sort o' reckoned I'd kind o' like fer to hev a bit o' chin-chin with ye, boss," hastily amended the veteran.

"Very well, Hockett. Glad I met you so near the house. Come in, both of you, please."

"Thanks, but maybe I'd better wait until Mr. Hockett has had his say out," modestly suggested the Sport from Hard Luck.

"No, no, now! I want you, too; an' I want you right smart!" declared Samuel, grasping an arm and obliging Arlington to bear them company.

After all, it did not require any vast amount of force, for something in both face and manner had aroused an interest in the sport, which would only be appeased by hearing all, either at first or at second hand.

Still powerfully irritated over his recent repulse, which was by no means sweetened by the implied taunt from Erickson's lips, that he would be far less ready to cast insinuations into the face of the crippled thug had Dick Fitchner been able to stand up for himself, Mr. Boulware led the way into his house.

Hotspur Hal flushed a bit as he removed his hat to bow in answer to that given by Cora Boulware, and he felt just a bit sorry that he had not stopped to shift his suit before leaving the store in which his usual costume had passed for the night.

But the owner of the house did not give his guests time for more than bow and passing greeting, for he led the way directly to his own room, shutting door behind them when all had entered.

Sam Hockett looked guardedly around, as though this might be his first introduction to these inner regions, but Arlington felt a far deeper interest in the matter which had led up to that call upon Leonard Boulware.

Catching the speculator's eyes, he gave wink and then guarded nod toward the old prospector, which hint was promptly acted upon by their host.

"It is a matter of business you wish to see me upon, Hockett?" asked Boulware, deeming any less blunt approach wholly unnecessary.

"Waal, now, boss," drawled Samuel, shifting uneasily on his chair. "Business? An' yit I do sort o' reckon ye mought come to pritty nigh call it business, too!"

"Very well, Hockett. I'm always glad to help an honest fellow, and if I can serve you in any way, shape, or manner, be sure I will do it. May I ask just what the matter is, then?"

"Done heard ye lost a big wad o' money t'other day, boss?" blurted forth the prospector. "Was it so, or just town-talk, like?"

Leonard Boulware gave a start of surprise, his face catching a bit of light and a half-hungry expression leaping into his eyes.

That curious manner made him almost hope—but that was folly!

"I did lose some money," he said, speaking with forced composure. "Why do you ask, Hockett?"

"How much was it, ef that's a fa'r askin'?"

"Twenty thousand dollars—worse luck me!"

"Pritty tol'able nice wad, an' that's a fact! An' how was it all fixed up, boss? 'Pears like a boodle like that'd take a mule team to do the haulin' off!"

"I had it in bills, mainly fifty and hundred dollar notes. When all was neatly laid and sealed up in stout paper, the sum didn't make any very impressive appearance, you understand?"

"An' the wad was hid into the cart ye sent over the dump, was it, now, boss?"

Leonard Boulware could no longer contain himself, but leaning forward to gaze keenly into that gaunt visage, he cried, almost fiercely:

"You know something—you know all about that money, Sam Hockett! You have something—out with it, man alive!"

"Do you know anything about it, though, pardner?" interposed Hotspur Hal, in tones less calculated to alarm or to offend.

Huckett gave a slow grin as his little eyes turned from one face to the other, then returning to that of the speculator, who showed how powerfully he was being stirred.

"Waal, now, boss, I reckon mebbe as how I do know a leetle somthin' about it, an' so—ef a critter was to sort o' putt ye into the way o' gittin' your money back—"

"If you can do that, Huckett, I'll pay you a reward which will—"

"Stiddy, thar, boss!" lifting hand to cut the speech short.

"I mean it, though. I'll give you a thousand dollars if you put me in the way of recovering the amount I lost," earnestly cried the speculator, resolved to have his say out in spite of that lifted paw.

"Stiddy, thar!" repeated the old fellow, frowning as though he had been offered an insult. "I hain't a hog, ef I do know how to grunt! An' thar's only one way you could sort o' help things along fer Sam Huckett, ye want to understand, now!"

"And that way is—name it, man alive!"

"Will ye grub-stake me ef I git yer money back then?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

AFTER THE HOT STUFF.

"Will I grub-stake you?" echoed Boulware, surprised by the extremely moderate desires of this queer customer.

"Waal, now, that 'pears to be pritty much the size of it, boss," Sam Huckett said, more his natural self now that the ice was fairly broken. "'Twon't take so mighty much of a wad, nuther. Jest 'nough fer to run me by my lonesome ontel I kin sort o' make a strike; the one season, then?"

"And if Mr. Boulware agrees to this you will tell all you know?" asked the Sport from Hard Luck.

"Sure! All I ax fer pay is a grub-stake ontel I kin hit off a bonanza, which I know to a dead moral is—eh?"

For Leonard Boulware was leaning far enough forward to grip an arm, then speaking earnestly:

"I'll agree to all you can ask, Huckett, if you on your part will or can tell me how I can get on the right track of that money!"

"Tellin' would do, is it, boss?"

"Yes. Show me how I can set to work with a fair prospect of regaining my own, and you can name your own terms."

The man with the Winchester parted lantern jaws in a subdued laugh, which left his sharp-pointed nose the centre point of a world of wrinkles, then as abruptly turned grave and sober visage freeing his arm from that nervous grasp as he spoke dryly:

"Waal, now, boss, wouldn't it do jest es well ef ye was to see the blessed wad, which—like this!"

Huckett drew a flat package from his bosom and thrust it into the hand of the bewildered speculator, then leaned back in his chair to give full vent to an amused chuckle.

"The money, by glory!" exploded Hotspur Hal, who had not let his fancy run to that extent. "The money—how came you with it, Sam Huckett?"

"Waal, now, I didn't quite Punch and Judy it, anyway," coolly quoth the prospector, plainly enjoying the situation. "I'll tell you jest how I come to ketch it all, ef you'll jest be so good es to take a weenty squint-it-over, boss; jest to see ef she's all thar in a heap!"

Until now the speculator had sat like one in a daze, holding the soiled package in hand and staring at it with wide eyes yet scarcely able as yet to realize the marvelous truth.

The paper envelope was broken at both ends, and one could see the ends of bank bills, or gain an idea as to the value of the whole by ruffling those ends; but the wax was still in place near the centre of the package, and to all seeming those

notes had never been drawn away since first put up in that shape.

Now, with nervous fingers and bated breath, Leonard Boulware tore the paper off, quickly sorting over the money, while Hotspur Hal kept tab as well.

"Twenty thousand, and that's no lie!" cried Arlington as the last bit of tinted paper dropped upon its fellows. "Huckett, you old villain, you! If I was a young girl I'd hug you clean out of your boots!"

"An' I'd be kickin' an' bawlin' wuss then a bay steer ef ye was!" declared the prospector, grinning all over his face. "Then ye hain't nyther o' ye gwine fer to jump onto me es bein' Punch an' Judy?"

"Of course not, but—tell us all about it, can't ye, man, dear?"

Leonard Boulware gripped a brown paw to shake it cordially, saying:

"I can't find words to thank you right now, old friend, but I'll do it ere long. And your wishes—I'll double all you can ask for!"

"That's all right, boss. I hain't no hog, even ef I does w'ar a crap o' bristles. An' es fer the rest—I come hyar 'spressly fer to tell ye all about how come it so."

"Go on, pardner. I'm itching all over as if I was in a nest of hungry fleas!" the Hotspur forcibly put it.

"Thar isn't so mighty much to tell, a'ter all, come to simmer it all down, an' 'twas jest bull-headed luck dumped right in my way," Huckett modestly asserted.

"The idee of it all is jest like this, gents, both. I was out in the hills lookin' fer a bit o' cheaper meat than a feller kin buy down hyar in Hardshell, an' when I did ketch a chainece, pritty late in the day, ole Betsy, hyar, sort o' went back onto me, an' I didn't throw my deer right in its tracks, as 'pears like I'd shorely orter.

"The critter tucked tail an' went off on the keen jump, an' the ole man a'ter it, see? An' he tuck to the kenyon, an' thar I was through the hull of that hold-up business."

"And you never showed up, even when the sheriff came with a bugle?"

"Wall, Sport, the idee of it was pritty much like this: 'Twasn't my day fer fightin' ner yit shootin'. I'd lost the deer, an' I didn't keer to lose my life, es well. An' so—then thar was the boodle!"

"You found it, then and there?"

"That's jest the idee of it, pardner. I was right thar when the hull blame heap come a splatterin' down them rocks, over the dump. An' the meal-sack went bu'st, an' the package come tumblin' out so I jest couldn't help but see it! An' so—thar you hev it, in a chunk!"

Although Sam Huckett seemed to think that he had made the matter sufficiently clear for all purposes, he was questioned by both Boulware and Hotspur Hal, until the minor points were cleared up enough to suit.

He took possession of the money package, and then hastened into secure hiding when Major Punch led his men in that direction after the lost cash.

"'Twas easy 'nough then to git back to town, whar I tuck time to do what I hedn't afore: count the money by turnin' over the eends. An' then I jest sort o' lay low, waitin' fer to l'arn for dead shore who the dingbats b'longed to, see?"

Again Boulware tried to force a fair reward upon the finder, but in vain. Huckett doggedly held to his original position: he would take no cash in hand, but would accept a grub-stake and say thank you into the bargain!

And then, after fidgeting with a degree of nervousness foreign to his usual nature, Hotspur Hal bluntly spoke out:

"You're wasting time mighty foolishly, I take it, sir!"

"How do you mean by foolishly?" asked Boulware.

"Have you forgot all about the Hot Stuff, then?"

The speculator started at this, catching breath sharply.

"You mean—just what?"

"That if I stood in your shoes, with your hopes and plans, I'd get a hustle on

me without further waste of time," emphatically declared the Man from Hard Luck. "You've got the full amount, now, haven't you?"

"With this recovered; yes."

"And your option reads that the bargain may be closed at any time before midnight, one week from now, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but—"

"Well, if the bargain was mine, and I thought I had such a paying snap in hand, seems to me I'd heat my soles hunting for the owner of the Hot Stuff right now!" forcibly asserted the Hotspur.

"You jest bet he's ketched onto the right idee of it all, too!" chimed in the man with the Winchester.

Leonard Boulware seemed to finally catch the same idea, for he left his chair, speaking hurriedly:

"You're right, and I thank you for reminding me, friends. This unexpected recovery has partly dazed me, seems like, but now—I'll do it, and that right off the handle, too!"

His absence from the room was but brief, and returning he unlocked the safe which stood in one corner of his snugery, taking therefrom a package somewhat similar to that so recently restored by the prospector, then turning to his guests to say:

"May I beg your further company, gentlemen? I'd like you to witness the transfer when I've found Grinberg. After all the trouble I've had over the Hot Stuff, I'm not going to miss a single chance from now on!"

"And you're mighty right in just that, too!" declared Arlington. "Come Huckett. Of course we'll see you clean through with it, pardner, if only to help crow over—well, call it Punch and Judy!"

"Or Earl Chonister, confound him!" amended the speculator, with a laugh more hearty than he had given for weeks gone by.

But it was far easier to propose than to perform, as the trio were not very long in finding out.

They failed to see aught of Moses Grinberg, nor could they at first get on his track, though his customary resorts were visited in turn.

Finally a mutual acquaintance gave Boulware a hint, which he thought might be worth following up.

"I don't suppose it's generally known, but the fact is that Grinberg has been sleeping at the bank of late. And if anybody can put you on his track, Chonister surely ought."

Boulware seemed inclined to hold back, now, but Hotspur Hal was too deeply interested in the affair to give him such a chance for delay.

"Come, sir, and we'll look up Mr. Chonister. We're out after the Hot Stuff, and if we don't freeze fast to it before knocking off work for the day, then I don't want a red cent!"

"Sleeping at the bank! Isn't that—well, birds of a feather will flock together, I reckon!" muttered the speculator, giving way.

Their first move was toward the robbed institution, and within they found the banker, trying to get something like order out of confusion.

As Leonard Boulware showed such plain reluctance to have speech with the man whom he held in such detestation, Hotspur Hal volunteered to do the necessary talking, and when recognized by the banker, he said:

"Hate to bother you while you have so much on hands, Mr. Chonister, but we're looking for Moses Grinberg. Can you tell us where he might be just at present?"

Earl gave shrug of shoulders and smiled faintly before saying:

"That's precisely what I'd like to know on my own hook, sir!"

"I understand he has been sleeping here of late; is that so?"

"Yes. Once too often, I'm thinking, since he surely set up this job and let

in his pals to down me, even if he didn't strike me down himself!" declared the banker with sudden bitterness in tones and in face.

"What! Moses Grinberg? You mean just that, sir?"

"I do mean it, every word. And I'll kill the cur at sight!"

CHAPTER XXV.

THIEVES OF THE NIGHT.

Until now Leonard Boulware had held his powerful prejudice fairly under subjection, but at this he broke forth, bitterly.

"Bah, you villain! Maybe you can throw dust in the eyes of some, but here's one you can't even begin to foolish, Earl Chonister!"

"I know you have always disliked me, sir, although I never gave you fair cause."

"Another lie, and you know it! You have given me cause until—but that don't count. As for Grinberg, you're keeping him out of the way for fear I'll clinch the bargain for his Hot Stuff, and—"

"I pledge you my word of honor, Mr. Boulware—"

"Which isn't worth even the foul breath it takes to name it. Your honor? Ha! Ha! Ha! The honor of a—"

"Steady, pardner!" warned Hotspur Hal, slipping a deft palm across those intemperate lips, then almost forcing the angry speculator out of the bank and away.

But all further search was in vain. Whether or no Earl Chonister told the truth in declaring his belief that Grinberg had played him dirt in common with the Punch and Judy outfit, the simple fact remained that Moses was not to be found in or about Hardshell, search as the trio might.

And so, not a little to his fierce disgust, Leonard Boulware took all that cash back home with him, and the night descended without finding him full master of the long-coveted mine, the Hot Stuff.

Hotspur Hal let drop a hint or two concerning the risk of keeping so large an amount of money about the place, but the speculator was in one of his worst humors, and rather than risk being thought over-officious, the Sport held his hush after his first rebuff.

Still, that rejected warning certainly must have come back to Leonard Boulware, when, well along in the night, and after he had lost all memory of his troubles for the time being, he was rudely awakened to find himself in the vicious clutches of—

"Punch and Judy!" he gasped, mechanically, flinching from the light which was now turned squarely upon his face.

"Button up, or I'll croak ye like a mice!" harshly warned one of those masked shapes, grip tightening upon throat as the menace issued.

"Lift his roof or slit his weasand, Punch, if he tries to kick up a bobbery," spoke the second mask.

"That's what I'll do, Judy!" declared the first speaker. "You take that all in, old man, else you're worse than a fool; and that's needless!"

It really seemed as though these midnight callers wished to leave no room for doubting their identity, since they took particular pains to call each other by name, but Leonard Boulware took little heed of that fact, just then.

All at once he remembered the large amount of ready cash which he had with so much difficulty and risk accumulated for that particular purpose, and knowing just as surely that this was an attempt to ruin those fond hopes through robbery, he set up a desperate struggle, twisting his throat free to cry out in hoarse tones.

Only the one cry, for a deadly clutch fastened again upon his neck, Major Punch forcing him back in bed with savage energy.

"Quiet, you fool! Do you really want me to—kill you?"

But Boulware was past listening to reason, now, and thinking only of how he might best foil the robbers, fought with fierce energy, giving his adversary pretty much all he wanted to do, in spite of the advantage he had taken at the outset.

Again his throat was set far enough free to give forth a wild, unnatural screech, and then the second mask dealt him a cruel blow with butt of clubbed revolver full upon his unguarded head.

Vicious though that stroke surely was, it did not deprive the struggling man entirely of consciousness. Like one in a horrid dream he knew that his enemies were binding his arms and covering his lips with a folded cloth; not a regular gag, but sufficient to prevent him from giving any sound which could pass the confines of that chamber.

With wondrous celerity all this was done, the burglars plainly coming prepared for all that might turn up, and each one fully understanding just what portion of the work was to fall to his or to her share.

For now Leonard Boulware could see what he had at first only divined: these thieves of the night were really those notorious road-raiders, Major Punch and Captain Judy!

"Your money or your life, old man!" harshly muttered the larger of the two masks, at the same time flashing a bared blade before the eyes of their captive in menacing manner. "Where is it?"

"Pay up, or go over the divide, remember," warned Captain Judy.

"Devils—never give—kill me first!" came through that muffler, yet distinctly enough for those keen ears to catch aright.

"Tell me where the stuff is hidden, or I'll kill you like—"

"Steady, Punch! Somebody's astir—the girl, for rocks!"

For just then certain sounds came to the burglars, which told them those cries had surely been heard by others; by one, at least. And, almost surely, that one was the speculator's daughter, now on her way to investigate the alarm.

Just how he contrived to accomplish the feat even himself could not fairly explain, but the fact remains that Leonard Boulware slipped that muffler sufficiently far from mouth to give a wild screech (it could not be termed aught else) in hopes of saving Cora from worse befaling.

Unfortunately for his hopes, that cry was unnatural enough to add to the daughter's alarm on behalf of her parent, rather than send her in hurried flight to safer regions, and crying out to the father whom she surely deemed in bodily pain, if not at the point of death, Cora came that way all the more swiftly.

"Look to him, Judy; I'll tend to the cat!" swiftly muttered Major Punch, as he crossed over to the door, standing where he could grasp the alarmed girl as she first entered.

And so it was done, powerful arms clutching Cora as she opened the door in dauntless affright, then a strong hand closing over her mouth as its owner spoke in harsh, menacing tones:

"Shut up, you cat! Play half way white and neither of you shall be injured, but—obey or suffer penalty, mind!"

For a few seconds the maiden seemed like one paralyzed in body, only her eyes doing usual work.

Those told her all; showed her Leonard Boulware bound and partly gagged, lying upon his bed with a half-feminine shape leaning above him with menacing knife in one hand, the other pressing hard upon that heaving chest, the better to hold the man under subjection.

Those masked faces, the time of night, her own deft seizure, all told Cora what was in the wind; for she, too, knew that an unusually large sum in ready cash was then beneath that roof-tree.

Major Punch gave a brief laugh of triumph as his clutch was made sure, and

then, holding his own knife perilously nigh to that fair neck and partially exposing bosom, he croaked forth:

"Sing your little song, Boulware, or it'll turn to a funeral ode, and that in holy hurry! See! I hold her life in my hand, and unless you pay over the blessed wad—give him a bit of wine, Judy, dear!"

Satisfied that no father could or would remain stubborn when such an awful penalty was the forfeit, Captain Judy complied, removing the folded cloth which had smothered the speculator's voice.

"Where is the money, Boulware?" demanded Major Punch, shaking knife over his captive as though fairly eager to bathe it in red heart's blood.

"Hold, you devil!" huskily cried the father, struggling to free his arms that might go to the rescue of that loved one.

"Out with it, then. Where is the boodle hidden, I say? Speak quick, salt can't save either you or this girl!"

With a desperate effort of will poor Cora broke that awful numbness which had come upon her with that clutch of criminal hands, and as she struggled frantically to break away, she screamed forth:

"No, no, father! Don't tell—don't go up to—"

"Quiet, you scratch cat!" viciously growled Major Punch, giving Cora a fierce squeeze with the arm wrapped around her, and then flashing bare blade closer to her widely distended eyes.

"Must I bloody murder you all in heap, then?"

Instead of yielding supinely as nearly any girl in like situation might have been counted upon doing, Cora Boulware struggled to get free, and at the same time raised her voice in a shrill, reaching cry for help.

"Shut off her wind, can't you, pardner?" angrily demanded Captain Judy, at the same time finding her own charge by means easy to control. "If she keeps like that we'll have the whole town on our backs like a—croak her if this don't sing to tune, then!"

"I will! I swear to slit her throat!" Leonard Boulware, without you know and tell us where you've got that boodle stowed away! Now—last time of singing!"

"Don't—I'll tell—I'll give you all rather than—my poor child!" hoarsely gasped the half-distracted father.

"No, no, father!" again screamed the maiden, either bolder than her parent, less fully realizing how terribly imminent their peril surely was. "I will let—don't tell!"

"Will you hold your hush, fool?" growled Major Punch, slapping hand over those lips with brutal force. "And spit it out, Boulware! Where is the money stowed away, then?"

"Talk true or see her go over the range!" warned Captain Judy.

Forgetful of all else save the peril which menaced his only child, Leonard Boulware gasped forth:

"I will—in the safe. I'll show you only spare my girl!"

"Good enough!" cried Major Punch with a brief laugh of fierce exultation, he moved forward. "Let him up, and see that he plays all over white now we've got to—the devil!"

For Cora Boulware suddenly sprang away from her captor, grown careless he saw the victory won, and while through the open doorway her voice came out in a wild, piercing scream for assistance!

CHAPTER XXVI.

POWDER BURNS AND BLOOD FLOWS.

"Look to him, Punch!" cried Captain Judy in anything but musical tones as she sprang with amazing swiftness to the fleeing maiden.

Scarcely was Cora clear of that side of the road-agent was upon her jerking the maiden back and then clashing down her arms as she tried to escape against captivity.

With truly remarkable strength for a woman of her size, Captain Judy quickly overcame the girl, and was dragging her back to that chamber when Major Punch appeared, guarding the father and saying:

"Down stairs, Judy, in the safe. Take the girl along—for lively, now! No telling what ears may have caught those yells!"

"I'll slit her throat if she's been heard, and that's a dead sure thing!" viciously vowed the female road-agent, giving Cora a squeeze and shake which was anything but a loving caress.

"Don't harm—I'll give up all rather than have—"

"Button up, curse ye! Save breath until the right time comes for chin-chin, will ye? Now—lively, Judy!"

The two outlaws hustled their prisoners to the ground floor, then into the snugger of the speculator, where both gave brief ejaculations of delight as the light was flashed upon the safe wherein reposed such a snug little fortune in untraceable cash.

With trembling fingers Leonard Boulware turned the plated knob and unlocked the door, Major Punch in his fierce exultation knocking away that hand to do the rest himself.

He swung the heavy door wide, and tore out the inner drawer, giving a cry as he saw—the precious package lying snugly there!

"It's there? You've got it, Punch?" eagerly asked Captain Judy, not one whit less excited than was her comrade in crime.

"Got it? You bet I just have, then!" answered the major, snatching up the neat bundle and giving it a wave over head in triumph. "And now I reckon we might as well—"

This time it was Captain Judy who was in fault, for, sharing so fully that wild triumph of her mate, she relaxed her grasp without being aware of the fact, and for the second time Cora broke away in flight, screaming for help at the top of her voice.

At the same time Leonard Boulware, whose arms had been freed from bonds in order to let him open the safe, whose combination he alone was supposed to know, sprung into sudden action, partly knocking Major Punch over as he made a desperate rush for a revolver which hung in its scabbard against the wall.

Whether through accident, or by intent, that same rush knocked over the lamp which supplied the robbers with light for their nefarious work, leaving all in utter darkness as the light was extinguished, fortunately without an explosion.

Oaths and cries filled the room, and there was a bit of confused scrambling when all eyes were blinded by darkness.

Cora's shrieks were still pealing forth, and masculine shouts now came to add to the confusion, while Boulware, jerking revolver from scabbard, began shooting toward those sounds, for he never knew that others than enemies could have come upon the scene so quickly.

A cry of angry pain blended with those shots before the revolver was emptied, and nearly at the same instant Leonard Boulware was knocked violently to the floor by a rushing body, which then sprang clean through the window, shivering glass and shattering sash as well.

That fall placed the speculator hors de combat for the time, as his head came in violent contact with the open door of the rifled safe, and when his scattered senses fairly returned to their owner, he found himself in a lighted room with the robbers gone, and one man lying upon the floor, bleeding from a pistol wound.

With spasmodic effort the still dazed man raised his head and shoulders far enough to catch a glimpse of his daughter, who was just then kneeling by the side of that man who—who was he, any way?

Boulware strove to put that query into words, but only succeeded in making a queer sort of noise; faint enough, yet suf-

ficiently loud to attract the notice of his daughter.

Cora turned a startled look that way, then gave a low cry as she sprung to her feet and moved nearer her father, tremulously speaking:

"Oh, daddy, daddy! I thought—I was afraid you had been—was badly injured by those awful, awful men!"

"I don't—what in thunder is it all about, anyway?" demanded Boulware, voice gathering strength as he spoke on, yet feeling curiously weak and thoroughly dazed.

"The robbers—the money, which—"

An oath burst from the speculator's lips at this time, for the words served to clear his memory in good part.

He rose to a sitting posture, glaring around in quest of burglars and their boodle, but instead his gaze was once more arrested by that prostrate figure, which was—it surely was—

"Chonister! He here, and—the infernal scoundrel!" fairly exploded Boulware, as he at length identified that figure with the young banker whom he so doggedly detested.

"No, no, father!" expostulated Cora, trying to check that mad rising when recognition came. "He never—he came as a friend, dear!"

"Friend, be—!" fiercely cried Boulware, as he pushed the maiden aside with a sweep of his right arm. "He came here to—ha! The fellow thought to rob me so I couldn't pay for the Hot Stuff, did he?"

"No, no, he never—he surely never, father! Only for him we might have been murdered like—like you have killed him!"

Her voice turned quavering and unsteady at this, and Cora turned toward the banker, with hardly as fierce dislike in her gaze as filled both face and eyes of her parent just then.

There was blood marking Chonister's face, and as he lay there under the lamp-light it really seemed as though his earthly pilgrimage was at an end. For the mark of a bullet was upon his left temple, and unless the lead had turned—

"Cora—where are you—my love?"

Both father and daughter gave start at this, for 'twas almost like the dead speaking.

And then, with a spasmodic movement, Earl Chonister raised partly up, supported by one hand and arm, while the other lifted to clasp his injured temple.

He stared around the room like one just rousing out of an ugly dream, then gave a low, glad cry as he at last recognized the maiden.

"You, Cora? Thank heaven I was—not too late to save—my love!"

With a scarcely articulate cry the maiden sprung to his side, arms lending the support which Chonister as yet needed, for the moment forgetful of all else.

But Leonard Boulware both heard and saw, and while he was for the first few seconds literally petrified in his tracks, hot anger quickly resumed its sway, and springing forward he caught Cora by the shoulders and dragged her forcibly away, harshly speaking the while:

"Stop, girl! You shan't dirty your hands by even touching the infernal scoundrel who dared come here to rob me of—"

"No, no, father, he did not—he could not do so!"

"I rob you sir?" demanded the young banker, face flushing with indignation as he caught the full meaning of that mad speech.

Boulware shoved Cora away, giving surly growl as he stooped to pick up the pistol, which he had torn from the wall when breaking away from Major Punch.

He cocked the weapon as he rose again, crying out almost viciously as the weapon rose to a level with that wounded man:

"Hands up, you thief and robber! I'll blow you through like a—ye will have it, then?"

For Chonister made an effort to regain

his feet, and doubtless imagining an assault would follow, Leonard Boulware pulled trigger while the silver drop fairly covered heart of the crippled banker.

The hammer fell, but no explosion followed; most fortunately the weapon had been wholly emptied by the speculator himself, ere the road-agents could fairly clear the premises.

Again Cora interposed, flinging her arms about neck of father, heedless of the weapon which was thus pinioned between their bodies, half-sobbing, half-praying for mercy.

"He never—he came to help us, daddy! I know he couldn't—and when you think that he is one of those awful—"

Perhaps it was just as well for all concerned that just then a number of citizens came rushing into the building, the alarm having spread far enough to fetch a force to the rescue, though rather late in the day to be of much service.

Naturally enough all was once more confusion, where questions were poured forth in a flood, without any waiting for answers.

Bethinking himself at last that precious time was being cut to waste, which might much more wisely be employed if he hoped to recover the large sum of money taken by Punch and Judy, Leonard Boulware hastily told his story, denouncing the authors of that latest outrage, and begging his friends to make chase without further delay.

As the alarm spread more widely, and the crowd grew thicker, it was no very difficult task to start off a number in search of sign; but even Boulware himself began to feel that his chance of seeing aught more of the Hot Stuff fund was sadly slender, indeed.

Meanwhile Earl Chonister was rallying from his hurt; nothing worse than a cut through flesh to temple bone, made by one of the wildly flying bullets sent into the gloom by Leonard Boulware himself.

The shock had stunned for a time, but no bones were fractured nor was the young fellow likely to suffer any especial ill effects from the injury now he had begun to rally.

And while the father was preaching pursuit and vengeance, the daughter was receiving heartfelt thanks from Earl Chonister, both for the moment forgetting that too harsh parent, until—

Again Cora was torn away from the banker, and once again Boulware denounced the young man as one of the Punch and Judy outfit.

"Go, you scoundrel! Leave my house, at once, or I'll kill you like a cur—as I believe you are, before high heaven!"

And, forced to bide his time, Earl Chonister took his departure.

CHAPTER XXVII.

PUNCH AND JUDY IN FLIGHT.

It was Major Punch who demolished that window, electing that risky avenue of flight in preference to one which promised still more serious obstacles to retreat with his rich booty.

For those repeated screams had surely done their duty, and aid was even then rushing into the house from the front.

A word and a touch warned Captain Judy of his intended action, and but a very few seconds separated the notorious couple as they won clear of the building, then sped away under the mingled moonlight and darkness to make that escape assured.

Fleeing at top speed, and heading for a point determined on in advance, it took but little time for the burglars to win the spot where a couple of good horses were tethered, waiting the result of their bold venture.

"Devil to pay, and somebody hot after us or I'm 'way off!" hoarsely vowed the major, jerking knot out of halter and swinging himself into the saddle, too excited or too greatly preoccupied by thoughts of himself and precious burden to lend his fair mate a gallant hand.

Not that Captain Judy especially needed any such assistance, judging from the agility she displayed in both flight and mounting; and then, as the twain skurried off toward the rugged hills, she spoke:

"You've got it safe, pardy? You didn't drop it when—"

"You bet your sweet life I've got it! And I'll freeze fast to it in spite of man and devil until—steady, there!"

It was nothing worse than a trip and half-stumble, after which the good horse trotted more freely than before.

The next half hour of flight was filled with doubts of pursuit, and it was not until that length of time had fairly expired that the robbers began to rest easy upon that score.

"Better luck than I looked for, and that's a charming fact!" declared Captain Judy, with almost the first full, free breath drawn since that abrupt leaving-taking.

"You're right! That precious squaw-cat! I reckoned she'd have the biggest part of Hardshell down on top of us in a nasty heap! As it is—well, it surely might be worse!"

"And that's no lie, either, pardy. So mighty much worse that instead of riding along here, whole and sound, we might be put on exhibition as tight-rope artists, or—even sand-sifters!"

Captain Judy laughed, her voice ringing forth quite melodiously, but evidently the tune was far from pleasing to the ears of her companion in crime.

"Let up on that, will you? This still night air can carry sounds so far that—and I'm not dead sure some of those infernal curs are not even yet upon our scent!"

"Oh, come off! If so, we'd have caught something of their yelpings before this. If it was only for the likes o' them, I wouldn't be worrying over the prospect; not any!"

"Nor I, only—curse the crooked luck, anyway!"

"What now, Punch?"

"Dick Fitchner. Only for him, we might double back to town and play the same old game all over again!"

"That's what! You ought to have doped the howling cur, and I told you as much at the time. With him out of the road for good and all—"

"Talk's easy, but how about the doing?"

"I'd have done it, rather than left his clapper free to blow the gaff; as he surely will!"

"If he hasn't done that already, why not say?" harshly muttered Major Punch, his horse now at a moderate walk, thanks to the difficult nature of the ground across which the robbers were now toiling. "Who's to be sure what he mayn't have told the doctor? A fellow of his calibre can't help telling the whole truth whenever he turns sick."

"If the bomb had only done its work smoother!"

"Or Fitchner hadn't used too slow a fuse, why not say?" with a vicious snarl in voice. "Everything ran smoothly enough until that accursed Sport came on the boards. Ever since then—botch-work!"

"Until this night, you mean, pardy," with another laugh, as she rode a bit closer to her mate.

"This wad of money, you mean?"

"Sure! Fifty thousand, unless somebody has been lying like sin. Anyway, I know that the old man was hunting up Moses to close his option on the Hot Stuff, and that meant solid cash on the nail, you know!"

"Let Moses gnaw his thumbs until he gets hold of any of it, will you, now?"

"And the thick-headed fool really thinks to share and share alike, don't you know?" laughingly mocked the lesser rider. "But that's nearly always the way of it; big strikes come to idiots, while wise men like you and I, Punch, have to

scrub around on their wits until—oh, bless that Dicky Fitchner, I say!"

"I like the fellow just as much as you do, Judy," soberly spoke the chief of road-agents. "I reckoned he was done for at the start, but when he began to pick up a little, after that—"

"He never ought to have been let!" forcibly declared Captain Judy.

"How could that be hindered? He looked for something of the kind. I know that by what he said to the doctor; begged him not to let another soul come near him, and even went so far as to insist on an armed guard being placed before his door, the treacherous cur!"

Captain Judy gave vent to an unusually heavy sigh.

"Tough luck, and that's a fact! We had such a soft thing of it, old man; softer far than we'll ever run up against again, I fancy!"

"Well, we've got enough to make a fresh start in the world, anyway. With this boodle and what we left with Moses—"

"Unless he's played us dirt and skipped with it, all, Punch?"

"Don't you worry over that part of it, Judy. The Hot Stuff will hold him fast enough. You know he's only in hiding to keep Boulware from closing that option on the claim."

"Well, we've got to whack-up with Moses, of course."

"Who says so?"

"Don't you reckon, then?"

But Major Punch made no reply, and the road-raiders pushed on through the night, mile after mile, over such a rough scope of country that they might have made better time by abandoning their nags at the start, as they eventually were forced to do.

"Mighty nigh there, Judy!" declared the major, as he alighted and tethered his horse. "We'll soon rout out old Moses, and then—just you watch until the bullrushes, Judy!"

As in duty bound the captain chuckled at this quip, and then the two worthies picked their way past rock and through bramble until nigh enough their present destination for their purpose, when Major Punch raised forefinger to mouth, blowing a clear yet none too loud whistle.

The signal was promptly answered, and in a couple of minutes a shambling shape came out from yonder shadows, to eagerly ask:

"You is it, pards? What sort o' luck, anyway, then?"

"The devil's own, no less!" vigorously replied the major, moving to meet their confederate, adding as he came: "The whole blessed town is on fire over our job, pardner, and we've got to rack out o' this in a howling hurry—"

"Or play a tight-rope engagement, Moses," supplemented Captain Judy.

"And that's no lie, neither, Grin. Who could have thought it, though? A put-up job to trap us, just when we reckoned the boodle was good as in our solid grip! And now—run legs or suffer thrapples!"

"You mean it, honest?" doubtfully asked Grinberg, coming closer to peer into that face, now freed from its sable covering.

"It's true as gospel and mighty sight more dangerous," vowed Major Punch, with dolorous pleasure in making clear the evil tidings. "And it's a rope-pulling matter for us if caught; you, too, Moses, old fel!"

"No, no!" expostulated the mine owner, shrinking back. "They can't hurt me, for I never—thar hain't nothin' to show ag'inst me, an' you all knows it, too!"

"Is that so?"

"You bet that's so! Just give me my sheer an' I'll go back thar to kiver it all over an' make my—give me my sheer now!"

"All right, Moses, and—here you have it!" cried Major Punch, at the same time dealing Grinberg a crushing stroke on head with clubbed revolver.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A TRIO OF MAN HUNTERS.

In addition to Punch and Judy, there were a few other people who felt an unusual degree of interest in the Boulware place, or, more properly speaking, perhaps in what that same building contained.

When night came nigh without their finding aught of Moses Grinberg, and so being foiled in their eager desire to close the Hot Stuff option, Hotspur Hal took occasion to let fall a few words of warning against Boulware's keeping that large sum of ready cash at his house, with no more secure protection than was afforded by an ordinary safe.

As a matter of course, the purpose of their seeking Moses Grinberg had become more or less widely known, and even if the news did not come at first hand to the Punch and Judy outfit, they or their allies in town could scarcely be expected to be kept in ignorance much longer.

But Leonard Boulware was a man thoroughly accustomed to having his own way, and lest he be suspected of a more powerful interest in that little fortune than was his by right, Arlington gave way and said no more.

But he could act, all the same, and after studying the matter over in all its aspects, the Sport from Hard Luck took several others into his confidence, and eventually placed a guard over the house, though at a respectful distance.

Although by no means wholly convinced that they hadn't a secret interest in that pile of cash which would stand almost contrary to that of its rightful owner, Hotspur Hal chose as companions, in addition to honest Sam Hockett, Johan Hallibooper and—Earl Chonister!

"If he's really Major Punch, he can't work his mischief so long as I can hold him right under my eyes; don't you see, pardner?" the Sport shrewdly reasoned to the man with the Winchester, whom he knew to be true blue all the way through.

"Which he hain't ary sech blame thing, an' I'm bettin' my grub-stake onto jest that!" forcibly declared Samuel. "The younker's white es they make 'em nowadays. Ye know it?"

The Hotspur cordially hoped so, but declined to commit himself further until time could throw more light upon that puzzling matter.

And so it came to pass that at length, and almost too late to save both father and daughter from far worse than loss of money alone, those screams by Cora Boulware reached the ears of the volunteer guard, and an instant rush followed, in which Earl Chonister quickly took the lead.

Very nigh to his own undoing it was, too, for he had scarcely won his way into the house when he dropped to floor with a wild cry, stricken down by one of the bullets which Leonard Boulware dispensed with such blind prodigality there in the darkness.

Thanks to this wild commotion, capped by the utter darkness which reigned over all save when barking pistol briefly lit up the scene with a sulphurous glow, the rescuing party lost considerable precious time, and gave the burglars a chance to break away in headlong flight.

Hotspur Hal struck matches and found a lamp, which he ignited, then as quickly as possible struck off the trail of the robbers.

Instinct and cool judgment had no little to do with that, for neither father nor daughter were in fit condition just then to give any information of value; yet Hotspur Hal cleared the house in time to catch a passing glimpse of figures in flight, headed toward the not distant hills.

A guarded call brought Hockett and Hallibooper his way, and just as yonder horses broke off in a quick trot, the man-hunters caught the right course and from that moment stuck doggedly to it though thick and thin.

At first it was too hot a chase for much talking; breath could be put to so much better use than wasting it in idle chatter!

But even Hallibooper "plugged along" without groan or grunt, no doubt upheld by the glimmering hope that, in killing or capturing these robbers, he might possibly recover his precious packet of diamonds and other valuable stones.

Then, when that flight entered the rougher, less open country, it was a goodly bit less difficult for the man-hunters to keep within a reasonable distance of their human game.

Not that Hotspur Hal and his present mates were all the time within easy view of the fugitive outlaws; that would have been suicidal to his hopes, as no man could better appreciate than the Sport from Hard Luck himself.

At times they lost hearing as well, merely keeping to the right line by using shrewd judgment, backed up by the proverbial luck which Hotspur Hal seemed to hold a mortgage on.

Still, as that chase grew in length, matters became easier after a fashion, for now there was barely a choice of routes, and having determined what choice the outlaws made, all the others had to do was to follow after, watching keenly ahead, waiting until a fair chance for closing in should offer itself.

Hence it came to pass that at intervals speech was allowable between the pursuers, whereupon each man gave his ideas of the matter.

As a matter of fact, neither of the trio could say with any degree of certainty just whom they were chasing and dogging. Robbers who had surely captured the money meant to secure the Hot Stuff, of course, but beyond that all was surmise and guesswork.

"I'm open to lay any decent odds it's Punch and Judy," declared Hotspur Hal during one of those breathing spells. "If otherwise, and we slip up on nabbing those two sweet-scented ducks right here—well, we can always fall back upon Dick Fitchner."

"Ef he'd squeal, ye reckon?"

"He'll just have to squeal, if we're obliged to pinch him, pardner!"

"Vail, vail! Uff I gids me mein tiamondts pack soom more, I coes me git marriety a vrow, und saddle me town like a foolosopher—yaw!" declared Johan, with dolorous cheerfulness.

Even Hotspur Hal began to find his nerves thrilling as they grew more tensely strung when seeing their human game abandoning their nags.

"Not fer good, or they wouldn't tie 'em up so keerful," whispered Hockett, eagerly watching. "They're gwine fer to—stiddy, now!"

Believing that the robbers were heading for their retreat, where no doubt their other boodle was stored away, our friends crept still more cautiously after the pair of rogues; too cautiously, it soon appeared!

For, in place of keeping close upon the heels of Punch and Judy, they went slightly astray, turning into a canyon in place of scaling the more difficult slope which led to the hiding place of Moses Grinberg.

For some little time and distance the man-hunters were deceived, and only given light then by hearing a whistle sound far above their heads; a whistle which was plainly a signal, since a quavering answer came with gratifying promptness.

"Confound the luck, anyway!" exploded Sam Hockett at this discovery. "Ef we hain't—"

Hotspur Hal caught an arm and gave it a vigorous squeeze while commanding silence; for, just then, the sound of human voices could be heard on the higher level.

Breathlessly the man-hunters waited, straining ears to catch those interesting sounds, for now there was more than idle chatter going on!

A dull, sickening stroke! A few hurried

scramblings! And then, after a pause, which seemed almost an age, glimpses could be caught of dim, phantom-like shapes far above, and then—

A human body came falling over and over down the face of those perpendicular rocks, to crash into the top of a scrubby cedar tree, only a few yards from where the trio of man-hunters stood, appalled!

Those shapes above stood peering down into the deeper gloom below for some little time, but no cry or groan went up from lips of their victim, and then, clearly satisfied that no further trouble was to be anticipated on that score, they moved back, out of sight entirely.

"We'd ought to follow, or we may lose them entirely!" murmured Hal.

"Wait. Reckon I kin tell whar—an' yan' critter may—wait!"

Then, little by little, keeping low to rock and making no more sound than a shadow itself, Sam Hockett crawled forward to where that body was lying, saved from worse by that thick-topped tree breaking fall.

He was trying to recognize that scratched and bloody face, when the body stirred—groaned—gasped—spoke!

"Devils—kill 'em fer I—hain't done ary—"

"Whar be they gone hidin', pardy?" eagerly asked Hockett.

"The hole whar—Punch an'—devils, the both on—"

CHAPTER XXIX.

WHEN ROGUES FALL OUT.

Captain Judy gave a cry and start as Moses Grinberg went down before that treacherous stroke, for this was all new to her, and Major Punch had not taken her into his confidence so far.

"Let up on that yowlting, can't you?" harshly warned the chief of road-agents, giving angry look over shoulder, even as he dropped upon the felled mine owner to make sure his evil work was thoroughly done.

Left hand caught throat to fiercely contract, and thus guard against any outcry, but the precaution was needless.

Completely unprepared for such an assault, Grinberg had gone down before it like a log.

Although clearly taken wholly by surprise by this action, Captain Judy was swift to rally, and in another moment came a low, bubbling laugh as though the author had just made a pleasant discovery.

"He asked for a whack-up, and got a whack-down! Sure you've cracked his cabeza, pardner?"

"I've clapped a stopper on his chin-chin, anyway. And if you're not all fool—"

"Don't say it, Punch, even if you're just obliged to think it," Captain Judy interposed. "If you'd dropped me even the weentiest hint as to the way things were panning out, why I wouldn't—"

Major Punch gave a low, odd chuckle as he relaxed his grasp, finding no signs of sensibility in his victim.

"Well, Judy, I wasn't so mighty sure I'd get shut of the fellow in this way, and so—why did he ram his head right in my way, then? It seemed such an easy way out of it all, that I really couldn't help lending the idiot a jolt—just for luck!"

"Cheaper, too, mighty sight," admitted the captain, by this time entirely recovered from that unpleasant shock. "What was hardly enough for three, will make a pretty little stake for two, eh, pardner?"

"That's the way of it, all right. And now—"

"Better slit his throat to make dead sure, old man."

"Are you all fool to-night?" almost viciously cried the major as he caught his mate by an arm and flung her back a pace. "Put up that knife, I tell you!"

"I was only—surely you'll not leave him to get over it?"

"Nor leave him as a signboard, which

might point our way to the gallows, neither. Can't you even begin to see, then?"

"Point it out and maybe I can," almost surlily.

"Well, that ought to be easy enough, too. First, who knows that Moses has had any dealings with us?"

"Just we three, I reckon. Then you mean—"

"To keep anybody else from knowing that much. As for why Grinberg happened 'way out here by his lonesome, mighty few will be able to guess, and they'll get no help from Moses. For why; he tumbled over the rocks and knocked the blessed wind clean out of him; see?"

Again Captain Judy was compelled to admit inferiority to her devilishly ingenious chum, but Major Punch seemed just a little inclined to "rub it in," as he spoke on, at the same time coolly examining his latest victim for possible valuables, which might be worth taking.

"That would be the sort of accident almost any fellow is liable to while mogg-ing around in this blessed country, don't you see? Yet 'twould be a mighty queer accident that would slit a fellow's weas-and at the same time!"

"I can see it all now, pardner, and am free to admit you're in the right of it. It's a dump over the rocks, right here, then?"

"Sure! Lend a hand, now, and we'll bid good-by to Moses!"

"Hadn't you better give him another crack on the pate? He totes a mighty thick head on his shoulders, and—"

"As though the stopping so sudden wouldn't be enough! Grab hold and—both together, now—"

And so the senseless mine owner was disposed of, both assassins peering downward as though expecting to penetrate those gloomy depths.

The fall sounded loud enough to satisfy even Captain Judy, and after a few moments spent in vain probings of the canyon, the two pards drew back and turned away from the scene of the "accident."

Major Punch gave a chuckle of grim pleasure, saying to his mate:

"Luck's coming our way in great big chunks, after all! Moses could not fairly lay claim to a share in this boodle, seeing he took no risks upon himself, but for the other—well, he was just scoundrel enough to play he owned at least a third of all that!"

"Well, of course, we couldn't afford to stuff the hog to that extent, but he did help us, there. Only for him—"

"Of course," admitted the major, but somewhat testily, still leading the way in the direction from whence the ill fated mine owner had come, in response to the signal given. "Moses let us in, and so made it easier to down Chonister, but we'd have turned the trick all the same, wouldn't we? Eh?"

"Sure! And yet—wonder why Chonister cottoned so warmly to the fellow? Certainly Grinberg wasn't just his style, all told."

"Had a sneaking fancy for the Hot Stuff himself, of course. And, too, as Moses said, wanted to keep him from being got hold of by Boulware. But—here we are at last!"

Major Punch led the way into a rude sort of cavern, which might have passed very well as a wild beast refuge, but certainly was scarcely fit for human habitation; yet the light which now sprung up as a match was struck plainly showed that the den had been thus utilized.

By the light of that match Major Punch sighted a bit of candle stuck fast to a point of rock by its own grease, and with a second little torch he soon had sufficient illumination to serve their present wants.

"What if Moses—wonder if the rascal would try to do us dirt like that?" exclaimed Captain Judy, who seemed inclined to look upon the dark side of things that night.

"The rocks? Why should he, then? Don't play the fool, pardner, when—see!"

Moving rapidly and to the point, the chief of road-agents uncovered the treasure, over which his mate plainly held such uncomfortable doubts.

"It's safe as safe, and even if Moses took to feasting his eyes while waiting for us to come, he never let any stick to his fingers," declared the major, handling the money and a still more valuable package, which Johan Hallibooper scarcely dared hope to ever lay eyes upon again.

"All there? Even the diamonds, pardy?"

"Take a look for yourself if that'll help convince you," said the taller thug, drawing back a bit to make way for his comrade in crime.

Feeling the powerful fascination which so few of us are able to resist on occasion, Captain Judy bent over the treasure, fondling the notes and jingling the golden coin for a while, then turning to the package and opening it to give an inarticulate cry of almost fierce delight as the gems flashed and sparkled by candle-light.

"Look at 'em—just look at 'em all! Think of what a fellow can buy with these, and—add to 'em the boodle from Boulware's, pardy! Put that alongside all this and just think—what a glorious little pile it makes for just two of us!"

Captain Judy was lost in avaricious dreams, but was right speedily wakened to an ugly truth, for Major Punch spoke in harsh, rough accents:

"You lie, Judy! There's just enough for one!"

With start and cry the smaller robber turned head toward the speaker to find the major, revolver drawn, and—muzzle pointing that way!

"What? You say—"

"Not nearly enough for two, but a nice little pile for one," grimly repeated the man with the drop.

"Come off, pard! You're crazy to think—drop it, I tell you!" the captain cried, yet shrinking a bit as memory came back of poor Grinberg's recent fate.

"I'd rather drop you, Judy. Ready, now, for I'm going to put you where the dogs'll never—ha!"

For just then his mate gave a sudden whirl and fired a shot without wasting time in drawing gun, and the next instant the twain came together in a death lock, fighting viciously, cursing furiously, struggling as only thoroughly desperate criminals know how.

Two or three shots rung forth, and thus guided, Hotspur Hal and his comrades rushed into that den, to immediately pounce upon the combatants, tearing them apart as quickly as possible.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE END OF THE HUSTLE.

It was an easy matter to separate the two criminals, for even in those few seconds deadly work had been wrought, and while one still drew the breath of life, the other barely panted once or twice ere the light went out forever!

"A woman—it's Captain Judy, for a fact!" cried Hotspur Hal as he took note of those half-feminine garments.

"Waal, then, it's a woman with a man's head onto her!" grimly averred Sam Hockett, whose lot it happened to be to fasten upon that particular person in separating the rogues. "An' that man is—will ye take a weenty squint this way, pardner?"

With a little ejaculation as he heard those strange assertions, the Sport from Hard Luck caught up the candle and held it closer to that pain and rage distorted face; yet a face which was instantly recognized by all three.

"Carl Erickson!" exclaimed the Hotspur, recoiling a bit to flash the light upon the face of the one who had figured as Major Punch in those recent hold-ups.

"And Dana Dedrick!"

"That's what's the matter," quoth the

man with the Winchester, apparently far less amazed than the Hotspur certainly was. "An' it don't stretch my 'magination so mighty blame much, nuther!"

"I never would have thought it, for—"

"Ach! Mein Gott in himmel! Vill you look py dose vich—mein tiamondts—mein shems some more!" wildly cried Johan Hallibooper just then, pouncing upon that little mass of flickering light and colors, to grovel there in the gloom, laughing and crying, chattering away like some intoxicated parrot, heedless of all else in that joyous recovery.

A hollow groan from the lips of the Hardshell gambler recalled Hotspur Hal to his wits, and after a hasty examination told him the young man who had figured as Captain Judy was past mortal aid, he turned his whole attention to the other criminal, hoping from his lips to gain information which would clear up still further puzzling facts.

At a hint from the Sport, Hockett left the cave to fetch forward Moses Grinberg, who was able to hobble along with a supporting arm, his almost miraculous escape from death being accounted for by striking in that dense-topped cedar tree.

By the time this witness was brought to the spot, Hotspur Hal had cared for the wounded road-agent as far as lay in his power, stanching the flow of blood and putting temporary bandages upon both wounds; one a bullet shot through his right breast, the other an ugly stab, which the mortally stricken "Captain Judy" had been able to deal in those few moments of savage death-lock.

These injuries were severe enough, yet Hotspur Hal felt fairly confident that they would not prove fatal, provided even ordinary care was given the outlaw; for, in spite of his profession, the gambler had lived a fairly temperate life, and possessed a powerful constitution.

Hoping as he did to extract the whole truth from those lips, it was hardly policy for the Sport to lend his prisoner too great encouragement. To the contrary, he spoke gloomily in answer to the questions put by Dedrick, shaking head as he made reply:

"I'm afraid you've caught it right where you live, old man. Either of your wounds would—but we'll do the best we can for you."

"So as to see me pull hemp, is it?" huskily asked the criminal.

"I don't think you run any risk of dying—in that way," gravely spoke the Hotspur, and after this fashion he so deftly worked upon the fellow's nerves that ere long Dedrick was ready enough to tell all he knew concerning the past.

Why not, since his minutes were surely numbered, and nothing could add to the black score already marked up against his name?

Dana Dedrick and Carl Erickson had led the "Punch and Judy" outfit through all, that double disguise aiding no little in keeping suspicion from turning their way.

At first they alone knew their secret, but, as a matter of course, it grew impossible to always remain incognito, and, among others, Dick Fitchner penetrated their cunning disguise.

Among other ambitions, Dana Dedrick hoped to become owner of the Hot Stuff, feeling that a vast fortune lay hidden there, only waiting for the right master to fetch it forth.

For this reason he had worked so hard and persistently to hinder Leonard Boulware from collecting sufficient cash to make good the option he held on the mine.

Moses Grinberg was only of late taken partially into their confidence, and then only to lessen the difficulty and danger which would otherwise attend their robbing the Bank of Hardshell.

Toward this venture Johan Hallibooper unwittingly contributed, by depositing his package of precious stones in Chonister's safe.

Grinberg admitted the two robbers shortly after that game of poker with Hotspur Hal and Sam Hockett, and Dedrick voluntarily cleared the banker from even the faintest possible connection in a criminal way with the Punch and Judy gang.

Moses added a word on this point, and a word very much to the point, as well, declaring that Earl Chonister was trying to secure the Hot Stuff himself solely in order to aid his lovesuit.

"He offered me seventy-five thousand, ye see, an' 'lowed he'd make it all up when he could turn the mine over to the ole man, an' say—"

Hotspur Hal comprehended enough, and unceremoniously cut the mine owner short off, preferring to question the wounded outlaw further.

By means of a horse litter, material for which was brought from Hardshell by Sam Hockett, together with a select party whom he took into his confidence, the wounded road-agent was taken back to town, together with Moses Grinberg.

Once there, the whole amazing truth was made known, all Hardshell seeing both dead and living, yet for a long time unable to trust the evidence of their own senses.

Probably the most completely amazed and thoroughly dumfounded of all was Leonard Boulware, when Hotspur Hal forced him to listen to the full clearing of Earl Chonister by both Dana Dedrick and Mose Grinberg.

There was only one thing lacking to fill his cup to overflowing; the presence of the Hardshell banker himself as witness.

And yet, perhaps, Leonard Boulware would have preferred that presence to the actual fact, if he had only known where Earl Chonister was, just then, and how pleasantly engaged!

Enough on this point, however, to say that, reluctantly or not, Mr. Boulware was compelled to admit wrongly accusing the banker, who might, after all, prove to be quite a decent sort of fellow!

While in the confessional mood "Major Punch" owned to the Sport that all attempts upon his life had been made by members of that gang, under orders from their chief, himself.

Coming from that unpleasant ordeal, bitter enough for one so stiff-necked by nature as he undoubtedly was, Mr. Boulware made partial amends by paying Moses Grinberg fifty thousand dollars in cash, and before an abundance of witnesses taking the title deeds to the Hot Stuff.

That same night a lynching-bee was inaugurated by a select party, and before the alarm could fairly spread beyond that circle, the dread work was done. And when morning came and search for the prisoners was made, only two grewsome corpses were found: those of Dana Dedrick and Moses Grinberg.

The payment for the Hot Stuff was found in Grinberg's cold bosom, and Leonard Boulware begged a select committee to take it in charge and look up the dead mine owner's heirs, which was eventually done.

Of course, Earl Chonister won Cora Boulware, and so well did he play his part that within the year his father-in-law was ready to take Bible oath that a finer, smarter, handsomer, whiter young man than his new boy never trod this blessed footstool!

To all of which Cora proudly said amen!

And Johan Hallibooper?

Turned his face toward the East, hugging his precious jewels to his bosom, having completely lost his ambition so far as reaping a Western harvest was concerned.

And Hotspur Hal?

Went his way as of old. And it is barely possible that we may meet the Sport from Hard Luck in the future.

THE END.

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834 The Wild Steer Riders; or, Texas Jack's Terrors.
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805 The Last of the Pirates; or, Doom Driven.
801 The Water Wolves' Detective; or, Trapping the Grave Ghouls.
791 The Coast-Raider's Death-Chase.
748 Arizona Charlie, the Crack-shot Detective.
704 Invisible Ivan, the Wizard Detective.
685 The Red-skin Sea Rover.
679 Revello, the Pirate Cruiser; or, The Rival Rovers.
672 The Red Rapiere; or, The Sea Rover's Bride.
662 The Jew Detective; or, The Beautiful Convict.
640 The Rover's Retribution.
635 The Ex Buccaneer; or, The Stigma of Sin.
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610 The Red Flag Rover; or, White Wings of the Deep.
605 The Shadow Silver Ship.
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587 Conrad, the Sailor Spy; or, True Hearts of '76.
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553 Ma. k Monte, the Mutineer; or, The Branded Brig.
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457 The Sea Insurgent; or, The Conspirator Son.
446 Ocean Ogre, the Outcast Corsair.
435 The One-Armed Buccaneer.
430 The Fatal Frigate; or, Rivals in Love and War.
399 The New Monte Cristo.
393 The Convict Captain.
377 Afloat and Ashore; or, The Corsair Conspirator.
369 The Coast Corsair; or, The Siren of the Sea.
364 The Sea Fugitive; or, The Queen of the Coast.
341 The Sea Desperado.
336 The Magic Ship; or, Sandy Hook Freebooters.
325 The Gentleman Pirate; or, The Casco Hermits.
318 The Indian Buccaneer; or, The Red Rovers.
307 The Phantom Pirate; or, The Water Wolves.
255 The Pirate Priest; or, The Gambler's Daughter.
246 Queen Helen, the Amazon of the Overland.
235 Red Lightning the Man of Chance.
224 Black Beard, the Buccaneer.
220 The Specter Yacht; or, A Brother's Crime.
210 Buccaneer Bess, the Lioness of the Sea.
205 The Gambler Pirate; or, Lady of the Lagoon.
198 The Skeleton Schooner; or, The Skimmer.
184 The Scarlet Schooner; or, The Sea Nemesis.
104 Montezuma, the Merciless.
103 Merle, the Mutineer; or, The Red Anchor Brand.

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583 Captain Adair, the Cattle King.
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544 The Back to Back Pards.
532 The Champion Three.
502 Bareback Buck, the Centaur of the Plains.
472 Six Foot Si; or, The Man to "Tie To."
431 California Kit, the Always on Hand.
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380 Tiger Dick's Pledge; or, The Golden Serpent.
359 Yellow Jack, the Mestizo.
338 Jack Sands, the Boss of the Town.
299 Three of a Kind; or, Dick, Despard and the Sport.
251 Tiger Dick vs. Iron Despard.
207 Old Hard Head; or, Whirlwind and his Mare.
171 Tiger Dick, the Man of the Iron Heart.
114 The Gentleman from Pike.
80 A Man of Nerve; or, Caliban the Dwarf.
54 Always on Hand; or, The Foot-Hills Sport.
29 Tiger Dick, Faro King; or, The Cashier's Crime.
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- 323 Hotspur Hugh; or, The Banded Brothers.
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291 Horseshoe Hank, the Man of Big Luck.
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271 Stonefist, of Big Nugget Bend.
266 Leopard Luke, the King of Horse-Thieves.
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258 Bullet Head, the Colorado Bravo.
237 Long-Haired Max; or, The Black League.
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223 Canyon Dave, the Man of the Mountain.
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202 Cactus Jack, the Giant Guide.
194 Don Sombrero, the California Road Gent.
176 Lady Jaguar, the Robber Queen.

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921 Buffalo Bill's Quandary; or, Velvet Bill's Vow.
915 Buffalo Bill and the Surgeon-Scout.
909 Buffalo Bill's League; or, Red Butterfly.
904 Buffalo Bill's Tangled Trail.
900 Buffalo Bill's Rough Riders.
895 Buffalo Bill's Secret Ally.
890 Buffalo Bill's Life-Stake.
882 The Three Bills: Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill and Band-box Bill; or, The Bravo in Broadcloth.
874 Buffalo Bill's Buckskin Braves.
869 Buffalo Bill's Road-Agent Round-up.
863 Buffalo Bill's Death Charm.
857 Buffalo Bill's Royal Flush.
851 Buffalo Bill's Double Dilemma.
845 Buffalo Bill's Redskin Ruse.
830 Buffalo Bill's Boys in Blue.
826 Buffalo Bill's Sharp Shooters.
822 Buffalo Bill's Best Bower.
816 Buffalo Bill's Red Trail.
812 Buffalo Bill's Death-Knell.
794 Buffalo Bill's Winning Hand.
787 Buffalo Bill's Dead Shot.
781 Buffalo Bill's Brand.
777 Buffalo Bill's Spy Shadower.
769 Buffalo Bill's Sweepstake.
765 Buffalo Bill's Dozen; or, Silk Ribbon Sam.
761 Buffalo Bill's Mascot.
757 Buffalo Bill's Double.
750 Buffalo Bill's Big Four; or, Custer's Shadow.
743 Buffalo Bill's Flush Hand.
739 Buffalo Bill's Blind; or, The Masked Driver.
735 Buffalo Bill and His Merry Men.
731 Buffalo Bill's Beagles; or, Silk Lasso Sam.
727 Buffalo Bill's Body Guard.
722 Buffalo Bill on the War-path.
716 Buffalo Bill's Scout Shadowers.
710 Buffalo Bill Baffled; or, The Deserter Desperado.
697 Buffalo Bill's Buckskin Brotherhood.
691 Buffalo Bill's Blind Trail; or, Mustang Madge.
667 Buffalo Bill's Swoop; or, The King of the Mines.
658 The Cowboy Clan; or, The Tigress of Texas.
653 Lasso King's League; or, Buck Taylor in Texas.
649 Buffalo Bill's Chief of Cowboys; or, Buck Taylor.
644 Buffalo Bill's Bonanza; or, Silver Circle Knights.
632 Buffalo Bill's Grip; or, Oath Bound to Custer.
629 Buffalo Bill's Pledge; or, The League of Three.
189 Wild Bill's Gold Trail; or, The Desperate Dozen.
175 Wild Bill's Trump Card; or, The Indian Heiress.
168 Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot.

By Buffalo Bill.

- 973 The Dread Shot Four.
969 Texas Jack, the Lasso King.
899 The Ranch King Dead-Shot.
820 White Beaver's Still Hunt.
807 Wild Bill, the Wild West Duelist.
800 Wild Bill, the Dead-Center Shot.
639 Buffalo Bill's Gold King.
599 The Dead Shot Nine; or, My Pard's of the Plains.
414 Red Renard, the Indian Detective.
401 One-Armed Pard; or, Borderland Retribution.
397 The Wizard Brothers; or, White Beaver's Trail.
394 White Beaver, the Exile of the Platte.
319 Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West.
304 Texas Jack, the Prairie Rattler.
243 The Pilgrim Sharp; or, The Soldier's Sweetheart.
83 Gold Bullet Sport; or, Knights of the Overland.
52 Death-Trail, the Chief of Scouts.

By Leon Lewis, Ned Buntline, etc.

- 773 Buffalo Bill's Ban; or, Cody to the Rescue.
682 Buffalo Bill's Secret Service Trail.
629 Buffalo Bill's Daring Role; or, Daredeath Dick.
517 Buffalo Bill's First Trail; or, The Express Rider.
153 Buffalo Bill, Chief of Scouts.
117 Buffalo Bill's Strange Pard; or, Dashing Dandy.
92 Buffalo Bill, the Buckskin King.

BY HAROLD PAYNE.

- 883 The Man from Mexico in New York.
872 The King-Pin Shark; or, Thad Burr's Ten Strike.
861 The Tenderloin Big Four.
853 The Quaker City Crook.
844 Tracked to Chicago.
836 The Policy Broker's Blind.
829 The Frisco Sharper's Cool Hand.
821 The Tramp Shadower's Backer.
813 The Sham Spotter's Shrewd Scheme.
806 The Grand Street Gold-Dust Sharper.
798 Detective Burr's Luna's Witness.
792 The Wall Street Sharper's Snap.
784 Thad Burr's Death Drop.
742 Detective Burr Among the New York Thugs.
734 Detective Burr's Foil; or, A Woman's Strategy.
728 Detective Burr, the Headquarters Special.
713 Detective Burr's Spirit Chase.
706 Detective Burr's Seven Clues.
698 Thad Burr, the Invincible; or, The "L" Clue.
690 The Matchless Detective.
680 XX, the Fatal Claw; or, Burr's Master Case.

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- 914 Snowflake Sam's Double.
897 The Six-Shot Spotter.
887 The Stranger Sport from Spokane.
873 The Sport Detective's Colorado Claw.
860 The Spangled Sport Shadower.
843 The Crescent City Sport.
832 Old Gale's Block Game.
804 The King Pin of the Leadville Lions.
786 Chicago Charlie's Diamond Haul.
776 Chicago Charlie, the Columbian Detective.
758 The Wizard King Detective.
723 Teamster Tom, the Boomer Detective.
709 Lodestone Lem, the Champion of Chestnut Burr.
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688 River Rustlers; or, the Detective from 'Way Back.
673 Stuttering Sam, the Whitest Sport of Santa Fe.
666 Old Adamant, the Man of Rock.
618 Kansas Karl, the Detective King.
552 Prince Primrose, the Flower of the Flock.
528 Huckleberry, the Foot-Hills Detective.

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- 929 Gentleman George, the Showman Sport.
912 Gentle Joe's Lone Hand.
903 The Train Detective.
896 Kent Keen, the Crook-Crusher.
888 Nightshade in New York.
879 Falcon Flynn, the Flash Detective.
871 The Crook Cashier.
859 Clew-Hawk Keene's Right Bower.
847 Hiram Hawk, the Harlem Detective.
840 Major Bullion, Boss of the Tigers.
831 Shadowing the London Detective.
817 Plush Velvet, the Prince of Spotters.
803 The Bogus Broker's Right Bower.
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779 Silk Ribbon's Crash-out.
766 Detective Zach, the Broadway Spotter.
751 The Dark Lantern Detective.
736 The Never-Fail Detective.
724 Captain Hercules, the Strong Arm Detective.
711 Dan Damon, the Gilt-Edge Detective.
701 Silver Steve, the Branded Sport.
694 Gideon Grip, the Secret Shadower.
684 Velvet Van, the Mystery Shadower.
678 The Dude Desperado.
671 Jason Clew, the Silk-Handed Ferret.
664 Monk Morel, the Man-Hunter.
654 Sol Sphinx, the Ferret Detective.
642 Red Pard and Yellow.
608 Silent Sam, the Shadow Sphinx.
592 Captain Sid, the Shasta Ferret.
579 Old Cormorant, the Bowery Shadow.
569 Captain Cobra, the Hooded Mystery.
559 Danton, the Shadow Sharp.
550 Silk Hand, the Mohave Ferret.
543 The Magnate Detective.
532 Jack Javert, the Independent Detective.
523 Reynard of Red Jack; or, The Lost Detective.
512 Captain Velvet's Big Stake.
505 Phil Fox, the Gentle Spotter.
496 Richard Redfire, the Two Worlds' Detective.
487 Sunshine Sam, a Chip of the Old Block.
480 Hawkspare, the Man with a Secret.
468 Coldgrip in Deadwood.
460 Captain Coldgrip, the Detective.
453 Captain Coldgrip's Long Trail.
447 Volcano, the Frisco Spy.
441 The California Sharp.
434 Lucifer Lynx, the Wonder Detective.
421 Father Ferret, the Frisco Shadow.
413 Captain Coldgrip in New York.
407 Captain Coldgrip's Nerve; or, Injun Nick.
400 Captain Coldgrip; or, The New York Spotter.
392 The Lost Bonanza; or, The Boot of Silent Hound.
382 The Bonanza Band; or, Dread Don of Cool Clan.
374 Major Blister, the Sport of Two Cities.
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352 The Desperate Dozen.
347 Denver Duke, the Man with "Sand."
340 Cool Conrad, the Dakota Detective.
335 Flash Dan, the Nabob; or, Blades of Bowie Bar.
321 California Claude, the Lone Bandit.
294 Broadcloth Burt, the Denver Dandy.
941 The Shadow Sport from Frisco.

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- 948 The Red-Gloved Detective.
931 Frisco Frank at Glory Gulch.
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908 The Doomsday-Den Detective.
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893 Yellow Gid, of Dark Divide.
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864 The Police Special's Dilemma.
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841 Graydon's Double Deal.
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823 The Athlete Sport About Town.
808 The Crook-Detective's Pull.
790 Plunger Pete, the Race Track Detective.
782 Royal Rock, the Round-up Detective.
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764 The New York Sharp's Shadower.
738 Detective Claxton, the Record Breaker.
714 Gabe Gall, the Gambolier from Great Hump.
703 Spokane Saul, the Samaritan Suspect.
692 Dead Shot Paul, the Deep-Range Explorer.
655 Strawberry Sam, the Man with the Birthmark.
646 Dark John, the Grim Guard.
638 Murdock, the Dread Detective.
623 Dangerous Dave, the Never-Beaten Detective.
611 Alkali Abe, the Game Chicken from Texas.
596 Rustler Rube; the Round-Up Detective.
585 Dan Dixon's Double.
575 Steady Hand, the Napoleon of Detectives.
563 Wyoming Zeke, the Hotspur of Honey-suckle.
551 Garry Keen, the Man with Backbone.
539 Old Doubledark, the Wily Detective.
531 Saddle-Chief Kit, the Prairie Centaur.
521 Paradise Sam, the Nor'-West Pilot.
513 Texas Tartar, the Man With Nine Lives.
506 Uncle Honest, the Peacemaker of Hornets' Nest.
498 Central Pacific Paul, the Mail Train Spy.
492 Border Bullet, the Prairie Sharpshooter.
486 Kansas Kitten, the Northwest Detective.
479 Gladiator Gabe, the Samson of Sassajack.
470 The Duke of Dakota.
463 Gold Gauntlet, the Gulch Gladiator.
455 Yank Yellowbird, the Tall Hustler of the Hills.
449 Bluff Burke, King of the Rockies.
442 Wild West Walt, the Mountain Veteran.
437 Deep Duke; or, The Man of Two Lives.
427 The Rivals of Montana Mill.
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562 Lone Hand, the Shadow.
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475 Chin Chin, the Chinese Detective.
465 The Actor Detective.
440 The High Horse of the Pacific.
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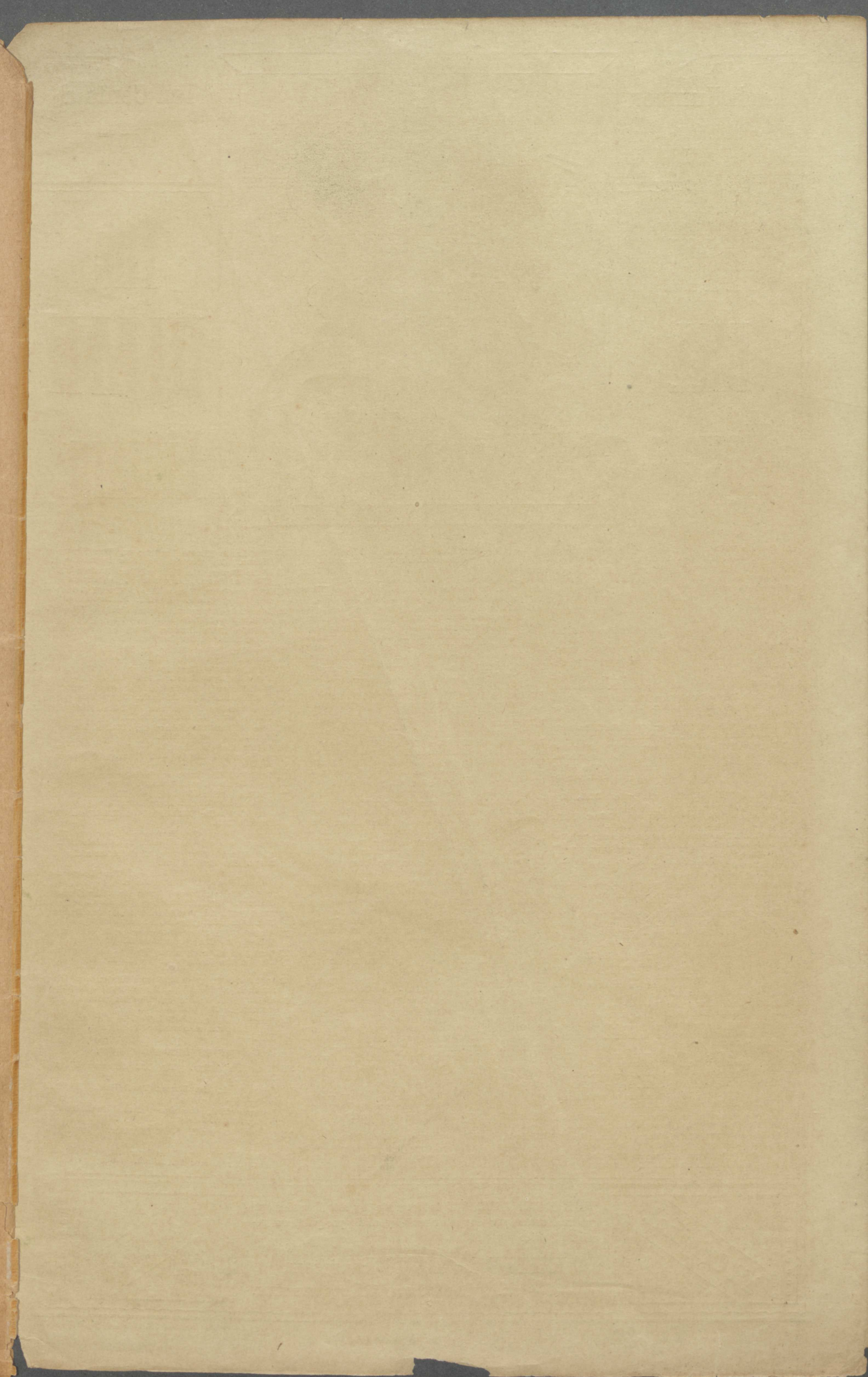
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